



THAT
WICKED
O'SHEA FAMILY

*Naughty
Earls
Need Love Too*

MERRY FARMER

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Merry Farmer

NAUGHTY EARLS NEED LOVE TOO

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Chapter 1

If there was one true thing that Maeve Sperrin knew above all else, it was that nothing was more important than friendship.

“It was horrible and terrifying,” Alice Woodmont, her very best friend in the entire world said as the two of them walked arm-in-arm through the high street of Belfast. “We skated within inches of being exposed to Lady Coyle, and all because Mrs. Horner used the last diaper to clean up the jam she spilled.”

They occasionally glanced into the shop windows that they passed, but their excursion was mostly for the purpose of gossiping and telling stories where no one who knew them would see them or overhear their words.

“Did Lady Coyle actually see Ryan?” Maeve asked, duly horrified by Alice’s story of near disaster. She blinked and went on with, “I thought Ryan had grown out of diapers.”

Alice laughed humorlessly and sent Maeve a wary, sideways look. “I only wish that Ryan had grown out of diapers. That entire process is taking longer than any of us want it to, though I’ve been assured that Ryan’s progress is normal for his age. Thank heavens that my darling boy lives with Mrs. Horner and not at home, under my parents’ roof. If he were to spoil the furniture there, as he has, unfortunately, done at Mrs. Horner’s, there would be even more hell to pay than there already is.”

Maeve made a sympathetic sound and hugged Alice’s arm tighter as the two of them walked. Alice was like a sister to her and had been since they were girls. There were times when Maeve felt she was the only soul in Ireland who had stepped up to support Alice in her hour of greatest need.

Three years before, Alice had been seduced by a charming rogue who had left her with child, but without any promise of marriage or support. From the moment Ryan had been born, Alice had shouldered the burden of having a bastard son almost entirely on her own. Her parents knew about Ryan, of course. Her mother had taken Alice away for what everyone else in County Antrim believed was a grand tour of the continent for the last five months of her pregnancy when, in fact, they had merely retreated to a country house in County Cork until Ryan was born.

Alice had discovered at almost the last possible moment that her mother had plans to give Ryan away to whoever would accept the boy, and by a miracle, she had convinced her mother to change her mind on that score. Maeve still wasn't certain how she'd managed that, but there they were, over two years later, with little Ryan being cared for by Katie Horner and raised in a cottage just past the edge of the Woodmont family's property. Mr. and Mrs. Woodmont seemed determined to forget they had a grandson by Alice at all, but at least they hadn't turned Alice out.

Yet.

"To be honest," Alice went on, her face pinched in worry as they stopped at the corner and prepared to cross the busy street, "I'm not certain how much longer the situation can remain as it is."

"Oh?" Maeve asked, bristling with anxiety on her friend's behalf.

Alice nodded, and as they started across the street, she said, "Mr. Horner is due to return from his service in the army soon. Mrs. Horner has indicated she might not have a place for Ryan after that."

"Oh, dear," Maeve sighed, immediately racking her brain for some sort of alternative plan for Ryan. "I thought Mrs. Horner was willing to raise Ryan at least until he was old enough to be apprenticed into some sort of trade, or until your situation changed."

Alice sighed as they stepped up on the far street and crossed to take a look at a window full of hats. "That was what she said at the start. She said that since God hadn't blessed her with a child of her own, she would think of Ryan as hers. But I have a feeling the upset and excitement of this past summer might have changed her mind."

Maeve hummed and nodded. The upset that Alice spoke of was a result of Ryan's natural father returning to Ireland and discovering his existence. Michael Feeney was a bounder and a cad, and the moment he'd learned he'd fathered a son with Alice, he'd used the boy to try to extort money from his own brother, Mr. Rory Feeney.

In the end, Michael's plan was short-sighted and easily thwarted. But in the process, Mrs. Horner had been injured, and Alice had nearly been exposed as the mother of an illegitimate child. Whereas only a tiny handful of people had known about Ryan before, more people had learned the truth through the course of the kidnapping and Ryan's eventual rescue. Beyond that, the whole, frightening incident had brought Alice's indiscretions back into the minds of her mother and father.

"Mama has been insisting to me for a month now that I should turn Ryan over to the Sisters of Mercy in Dublin," Alice said with a sudden sniff, wiping a stray tear that had sprung suddenly to her eyes with one gloved hand. "And we're not even Catholic."

"Oh, Alice, no." Maeve turned to her friend, ignoring the curious

stares of passersby to hug her. "You can't do that. Ryan is your pride and joy. You cannot give him up."

"I won't," Alice said, standing a little straighter and sucking in a breath. "I will not abandon my son simply because my parents are embarrassed by him. When we argued about it, I reminded them that they haven't been bothered by his existence, or even seen the darling boy, since shortly after his birth. He is of no concern to them, so they should not attempt to dictate terms to me where he is concerned."

Maeve winced slightly. "I have a feeling that sort of declaration was not well-received."

"No," Alice said, letting out a breath and dropping her shoulders. They walked on past the haberdasher, barely looking at the other shops they ambled past. "They still treat me as a child, even though I am most certainly not at this point. Not only a child, but a failure in everything that makes a good daughter. I am forever being reminded of how well my sisters have married and how proud they are of them and their children."

"Which is wretchedly unfair," Maeve added. Alice's sisters, Elizabeth and Prudence, were horrible, arrogant witches who had married the richest men they could get their hands on, even though they couldn't have cared less about the gentlemen. The two of them had made their husbands' lives miserable after they nabbed them, and they had immediately dumped their babies off on nursemaids from the day the poor things had been born.

Alice shrugged. "Too many things in this world are unfair. Your situation isn't any better than mine."

Maeve smiled at her friend, even though Alice was decidedly wrong. Her situation was perfectly fine, if dreadfully dull. She came from a traditional family of the prosperous middle class. She'd never wanted for anything in her life. She'd been well-educated and accepted by society.

But there she was at nearly twenty-eight years of age, unmarried and with few prospects. She'd had interest from gentlemen in the past, but none of them had struck her fancy enough for her to abandon Alice's side. In the last few years, her friend had needed her far more than she had needed to obey the standards of society and find herself a husband. She'd turned down more than one chance to marry and have a child of her own for Alice's sake, but she hadn't minded at all.

Until recently.

"Mama and Papa have told me that I must find a man willing to marry me and take me off their hands by the end of the year or they will turn me out to fend for myself," Alice said as they came to a stop in front of a wool shop on the corner.

Maeve's eyes popped wide. "They didn't!"

Alice nodded, but she didn't seem as mournful about the shocking ultimatum as Maeve would have thought she would be. In fact, she smiled and said, "Don't worry, I know just the man to swoop in and rescue me."

A wary feeling hit the pit of Maeve's stomach. She already knew who Alice had in mind. She'd known from the day that the man had visited them, and Ryan, along with his cousin, Lady Siobhan O'Shea—who was now Mrs. Rory Feeney. She'd known since the way the two of them had bickered over the man at Siobhan and Rory's wedding reception several weeks ago.

"Alice, please," Maeve said, lowering her voice and shifting to face her friend with a serious look. "Please don't say you have your heart set on Lord Carnlough."

Alice's eyes widened. "And why shouldn't I go after a man as fine and beautiful as Lord Carnlough?" she asked. Maeve knew that answer as well, but before she could open her mouth, Alice rushed on with, "He is an earl, but not one of the proud, arrogant sort. He already knows about Ryan, and judging by the way he was so willing to help us during the trouble with Michael, he does not care about Ryan's parentage. He wouldn't be able to acknowledge Ryan as his own in any way, of course, but I am certain he would allow me to keep my son and raise him along with any other children we have."

"Perhaps," Maeve said cautiously.

"Why, Lord Carnlough is a member of the O'Shea family," Alice went on. "Everyone knows that family is well-versed in scandal. For years, Lord Carnlough employed his own half-cousin as his valet. He, more than anyone, would understand the conundrum I'm in with Ryan. He would accept both of us as we are."

"I'm not convinced it would be that simple," Maeve said, wincing.

It wouldn't be simple because, as it happened, Lord Carnlough had turned her head as well when he'd assisted them with the muddle over Michael Feeney. Lord Carnlough had been gracious and understanding. He had been kind and helpful, and after the fact, he had been discreet. More than that, he'd been dashing and charming to her on all of the occasions in which the two of them had met. Simply put, he was the first man to catch and hold her interest in years, the first to make her heart pound in her chest, and to have her daydreaming about a myriad of naughty things nice young ladies weren't supposed to think about.

And because Maeve shared everything with her, Alice knew all about Maeve's feelings.

"Please don't ruin my last chance for happiness, Maeve," Alice said, as serious as the grave. "I know you're fond of Lord Carnlough, but please just let me have him."

“You speak of the man as though he were the last piece of soda bread on the plate,” Maeve snapped.

Alice winced. “I know you’re fond of him, but you will have so many other chances to fall in love.”

“And so will you, I know it.” Maeve rested a hand on her friend’s arm. She truly believed that Alice would make the perfect wife for a very lucky man someday. Just as she was also aware that desperation had convinced Alice she was on her last chance. She inched closer to Alice and said, “You don’t care for him as I do.”

Alice pressed her lips together for a moment and said, “You barely know the man. How can you be convinced that you love him already?”

Maeve wanted to argue that there were some things you just knew from the moment you met someone, but instead she said, “You haven’t known him any longer than I have. What makes you so certain he is the husband for you?”

It was Alice’s turn to open her mouth without actually making an argument. At last, she furrowed her brow and said, “What choice do I have but to pursue the man?”

Maeve could think of quite a few more things her friend could do besides stealing away the only man who had ever captured her fascination quite so much, the man who might be the last thing standing between her and spinsterhood. She thought of those arguments, but she hesitated to draw them like swords and wound the woman who was like a sister to her. Instead, she blew out a breath and turned to stare through the window of the wool shop, hoping all of the brightly-colored skeins of yarn would bolster her spirits.

What she saw in the shop startled every thought right out of her head. There, standing at the counter, looking as though he were in deep discussion about a large selection of skeins in shades of blue and red, his bright ginger hair unmistakable, was Lord Carnlough himself.

“Good heavens,” Maeve said, breaking into a laugh. “Do my eyes deceive me, or is that Lord Carnlough haggling over the price of wool?”

Alice turned to look, then let out a gasp as she saw what Maeve had seen. “This warrants an investigation,” she said, breaking into a smile.

Maeve followed quickly behind Alice as she moved to the door, then burst into the wool shop. The small bell on the door jingled merrily as they entered. They were instantly surrounded by the cozy scent of lanolin and dyes.

“...which is why you want to purchase seven skeins of the lighter weight instead of eight or even nine of the heavier wool, my lord,” the shop owner—a cheerful woman of about fifty—was in the process of

telling Lord Carnlough.

Lord Carnlough wore a calculating frown as he studied the variety of wool on the counter as though it were a major financial investment. He had a hand on one skein, and the way he stroked it sent shivers of an entirely inconvenient sort down Maeve's spine.

A moment later, Lord Carnlough glanced up. The moment he spotted Maeve and Alice, he jumped and spun away from the counter as though he'd been caught cheating at cards.

"Oh, good heavens," he gasped, his eyes going wide.

Maeve couldn't hide her smile at the way the man flinched and stepped away from the selection of wool. Guilt painted his handsome face, which only made her tender feelings for him grow.

"Are you planning to knit a sweater, my lord?" she asked, sending him her best flirtatious look.

To Maeve's surprise, instead of attributing his potential purchase and his presence in the wool shop to buying a gift for some aged female relative, he said, "It's for my nephew. I've never tried a sweater before, but I saw a pattern—"

The way he stopped abruptly, his eyes going even wider, as though he'd realized too late that he could have just denied everything, brought Maeve right to the edge of laughing out loud.

"Lord Carnlough," Alice said, inching closer to the man's side and glancing fetchingly up at him. "Don't tell me you're a knitter."

Maeve swallowed the wave of jealousy that crept up on her. Alice had just as much of a right to flirt with the man as she did, especially considering how droll the situation was. She just wished she wouldn't.

Lord Carnlough recovered quickly. He cleared his throat and tugged at the hem of his jacket to straighten it, then pushed a hand through his red hair. "My sister taught me when we were young," he confessed, his face turning a brilliant shade of pink and his green eyes sparkling with fondness for his sister. "I have found it to be a soothing and useful hobby, particularly during the stressful months when Parliament is in session."

"Do you knit while sitting in the House of Lords, then?" Alice asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

The gesture felt forced and manipulative to Maeve. Her own, budding feelings for Lord Carnlough wouldn't let her be outdone by her best friend. "I think it would be a brilliant way to make those long, dry debates pass faster."

Lord Carnlough glanced between the two of them, every emotion from guilt to curiosity to flirtation passing across his face. After holding his breath for a few seconds, he let it out in a laugh, softened his stance, and said, "Yes, it is a rather nice way to make it through those endless debates. Particularly for a humble back-bencher like

me.”

“You do not give yourself enough credit, my lord.” Alice inched closer still to Lord Carnlough, looking like she might lay a hand on his arm or start petting him.

Maeve loved Alice dearly, but she couldn’t simply push her feelings aside. Especially now that she had seen a side to Lord Carnlough that she suspected few had seen—a side she was utterly taken with.

“Do you have this pattern for your nephew’s sweater on hand?” she asked, taking a half step closer herself. “I have been known to knit a sweater myself. Perhaps I could give you sage words of advice as you attempt to conquer the design.” She added a winsome look of her own for good measure.

She was rewarded with a smile from Lord Carnlough that made her feel as though she had hope after all. “I don’t know if I could possibly impose—” he began.

A moment later, his smile dropped into a look of alarm, and he dashed to the side, ducking behind a tall display containing various knitting needles and hooks.

It was all Maeve could do not to laugh aloud, particularly when she spotted two young men who must have been acquaintances of Lord Carnlough’s as they paused on the street corner just outside of the shop. Their voices were just barely audible through the window, though Maeve couldn’t hear what they were saying. One of the gentlemen glanced briefly inside the shop—which caused Lord Carnlough to duck down farther.

Maeve couldn’t help but laugh then. “Are you frightened that those men will discover your dastardly secret, my lord?” she asked, her heart feeling light.

Lord Carnlough peeked out from behind the display, but he didn’t straighten and answer until the men outside had crossed the street and gone on their way. “I shudder to think what those bounders would say or do if they caught me in a wool shop,” he said, eyes wide.

“I fail to see how anyone could think anything but the best of you, my lord,” Alice said, still flirting as though her life depended on it.

The sad thing was, Maeve was reasonably certain Alice believed her life *did* depend on it.

“Your secret is safe with us,” she told Lord Carnlough, then winked for good measure.

Alice sent her an annoyed look when she did.

Whether Lord Carnlough sensed the sudden tension between the two of them or whether he was merely shaken by the appearance of men he knew, he took a step toward the door. “Ladies, it has been lovely encountering the two of you again,” he said, tipping his hat and looking desperate to be on his way. “I hope we meet under less...

anxious circumstances next time.”

“I look forward to it, my lord,” Alice said, returning to her best smile.

“Enjoy the rest of your day,” Maeve called after him as he darted out of the store.

Once he was gone, it was as though the air had left the shop. Alice lost her smile and clenched her jaw as she turned to Maeve. “Please,” she said. It was all she needed to say to communicate the wealth of difficult and complicated requests she was making.

Maeve winced and rested her hand on one of the skeins Lord Carnlough had been perusing. Her heart blossomed with affection for the man, but twisted with the conflict between her and Alice—a conflict that would only get worse.

“I cannot let him go without a fight,” she said quietly, staring at the wool.

Alice huffed out a breath, then turned to leave the shop.

Maeve felt positively miserable. Of all the men in the world, why did she and Alice have to fancy the same one?

“If you’ll excuse me, miss,” the shopkeeper said, looking put out, likely at the loss of the sale Lord Carnlough had represented. “I need to put these all back.”

A burst of inspiration struck Maeve. “Which ones were Lord Carnlough interested in purchasing?” she asked, then rushed straight on to, “I’ll buy whatever it is he had his eye on.”

The shopkeeper perked up and picked out several skeins to ring them up. “I think he’ll be pleased with these, miss.”

And if Maeve’s guess was right, he’d be pleased when she paid a call on him to deliver his wool...by herself.

Upon reflection, Avery O'Shea wasn't particularly proud of the

way he'd ducked behind a stand of knitting needles and hidden from Lord Kilrea and Lord Stamford when they'd crossed in front of Mrs. O'Toole's wool shop the day before. It was beneath the dignity of an earl to hide from other men when he found himself in a potentially embarrassing situation. If he was worth his salt, he would have stood bravely and proudly in the center of that explosion of color and softness and faced whatever teasing Kilrea and Stamford would have hurled at him.

Then again, the reason he had leapt into hiding was because he knew full well that teasing was the one thing he had a ridiculously hard time enduring—as witnessed by the harassment he was getting from his cousins and brother-in-law.

"I've never met a man more frightened of marriage in my life," Lord Fergus O'Shea, Avery's first cousin and, arguably, the patriarch of the family, laughed at him from his wheelchair. "Marriage is hardly the sort of thing a man needs to run screaming from."

"Says the man who fought against the idea of marrying himself for years," Cousin Caelian fired back at Fergus from the sofa in Avery's afternoon parlor, where he was entertaining his kinsmen with a sampling of new whiskeys he'd picked up on his trip to Belfast. Caelian was recently-married himself, and by all reports, the institution agreed with him.

"I had my reasons for dodging Henrietta's advances," Fergus argued, sending the rest of them as pointed a look as he could make with his one eye. They were all well aware that Fergus had fought against succumbing to the attraction between him and his wife, Henrietta, because of the crippling injuries he'd receive after an attack years ago. That attack had cost Fergus his eye and his ability to walk, but it hadn't cost him Henrietta. She'd insisted on marrying him anyhow, and after a fight, she'd won.

"Women like Henrietta do not grow on trees," Avery reminded his cousins, taking a sip of his whiskey. "And if you ask me, Fergus was damned lucky to end up with her in the first place."

“Yes, that woman puts up with quite a bit,” Rory Feeney, the latest addition to the O’Shea clan, commented with a laugh. “I can’t think of any man as obstinate as you, Fergus.”

“Except, perhaps, you?” Fergus fired back at him.

“I am not obstinate,” Rory said with feigned offense, lounging back in his chair and putting a foot up on the ottoman in front of him, “I just know the right way to do things.”

That earned a laugh from the rest of them.

“And is my sister aware of this?” Caelian asked.

Rory hid his besotted look behind his glass of whiskey. “Siobhan is coming around to the truth.”

“Which means she’s running roughshod over you,” Rafe—Lord Rothbury, husband of Avery’s sister, Angeline—said with a laugh. He added, “Poor thing,” with a teasing wink for Rory.

“We’ve strayed from the point,” Rory said, flushing an even darker shade of pink. “We were ribbing Avery here for dragging his heels on the whole marriage issue, weren’t we?”

“Yes, we were,” Fergus took up the topic with enthusiasm. Avery was beginning to regret plying his kinsmen with whiskey so early in the day. “Why haven’t you married yet, you old rake?” he asked with a laugh.

“I’m hardly old,” Avery answered, wishing there were a way to get the teasing over with. “Thirty-two is not old.”

“It is in marriage years,” Rafe said. “You’re wasting time galivanting around, having one pointless tryst after another, when you could be enjoying yourself with a fine and lovely woman.” He saluted Avery with his whiskey glass.

Avery laughed at the idea. “You married one of the few fine women I know,” he fired back, “and I could hardly have married my sister to begin with.”

“Yes, Angeline is the most marvelous woman in the world,” Rafe said with a satisfied smile, settling back into his chair.

“I think my Erica might vie for that title,” Caelian said with a proud grin of his own.

“No, that would be Siobhan,” Rory added, looking as though he might fight someone over the issue.

Fergus shook his head. “Henrietta has them all beat.” Before another silly argument could start, he went on with, “And the only reason Avery here doesn’t agree that a married life is the best sort of life is because thus far, he has only seen women as bits of fun and not as the glorious creatures they are.”

“Yes, Avery, and why is that?” Rafe asked with a mockingly serious look. “I’ve seen you walk out with dozens of London’s finest debutantes, and I’ve also spotted you carousing with some of the more

sought-after courtesans that ply their trade in town, but I've never known you to be serious with any of them. Why is that?"

Avery shrugged. "Why call it a night when there is so much more entertainment to be had?" he answered.

The truth was far more complicated than that. He did enjoy a bit of fun. At least, he had in his earlier years. It had been thrilling to be a young earl with ready money to spend bashing his way through London's naughty entertainments. At least, it had been in his twenties. And it wasn't that he'd been averse to settling down into a comfortable married life, like his cousins and some of his friends. It was just that he found the sort of woman who preferred a husband to a lover to be painfully dull. He'd found it tedious to have every dignified, respectable, insufferable young woman out to nab a titled husband thrown at his head during the last few seasons in London.

The sort of woman Avery preferred was flirtatious and free. She embraced the modern values of suffrage—not to mention the relaxed morals that often went along with those beliefs. And while the sort of women with those values that he'd come across bashing about London were willing to spend the night with him, they weren't particularly open to the idea of longer-term arrangements.

"It isn't that I don't want to marry and do my duty to my family and my title," he said with far more introspection, interrupting the continued conversation, which he'd stopped paying attention to. "It's that I've yet to find the right woman."

"Ah," Fergus said knowingly. The rest of them hummed and nodded and made sounds of consideration as well.

"There's the rub," Caelian said. "It's always about finding the right woman."

Avery would have spoken up and said they were damnably hard to find, but a face popped to his mind that stopped him.

Miss Maeve Sperrin. If he were honest with himself, he'd fancied her right from the start. Miss Sperrin had that crack of intelligence to her in all of the encounters they'd had. She was beautiful, with dark hair and eyes, a creamy complexion, and a mouth that he wanted to do wicked things to. She was brave and loyal as well. The way she stood up for her friend, Miss Woodmont, was one of the most admirable things he'd ever seen. He knew the truth about Miss Woodmont—thanks to the way Cousin Siobhan had pulled him into the dramatics of her suspicions about Rory over the summer—and Avery found it remarkable that a woman mere inches from being on the shelf would steadfastly stand by her friend when it was entirely possible that the association might ruin her.

He liked Miss Sperrin. That was all there was to it. But she wasn't the sort of woman an earl would immediately consider as a potential

bride. She was respectable middle class, not aristocracy, and he feared for the reception she might have among London society if she were suddenly made a countess.

“There’s something about that look on your face, Carnlough,” Rafe said, dragging Avery’s mind back to the conversation once more. Rafe wasn’t nearly the sort of joker that Avery’s cousins were, but he still wore a sly grin as he studied him. “That could only be the look of a man who already has his sights set on a woman.”

“Which would explain why he’s just ignored every suggestion we’ve made,” Fergus laughed.

Was that what they’d been discussing while he’d been away with the fairies, contemplating the wonder that was Miss Sperrin?

“Let me guess,” Rory said, swirling the whiskey in his glass as he narrowed his eyes at Avery. Even with those eyes narrowed, Avery could see the mischief in them. “He’s thinking about one of two ladies.”

“One of two?” Fergus glanced to Rory in surprise. “Have we narrowed it down that far already?”

“These wouldn’t be the two he was seen flirting shamelessly with at your wedding, would they?” Caelian asked, grinning like a fool.

“Miss Maeve Sperrin and Miss Alice Woodmont,” Rory said, as though declaring some sort of victory.

The others hummed and exclaimed as though it should have been obvious.

Avery wanted to smack them all for turning his muddled thoughts into their joke of the day, even as he reluctantly desired their counsel on the matter.

“You don’t think they’re too far beneath me?” he asked, wincing as he did. He hated sounding like a cad, especially since the rigid lines of class that had governed their fathers and grandfathers were slowly—very slowly—eroding.

“They both come from spectacularly well-respected families,” Fergus said with a shrug. “Neither of them have aristocratic blood, but I daresay they’re both women of nobility.”

“Yes,” Rafe agreed. “I might be a mere visitor to these shores, but even I have heard fine things said about both the Sperrins and the Woodmonts.”

“And they’re both quite pretty and charming,” Rory added. “Lady Coyle herself was intent on tossing me at one or both of them just a few months ago.”

Avery tilted his head to the side and considered that. An endorsement from Lady Coyle was one of the greatest signs of respect a woman in County Antrim could have. Of course, Lady Coyle had likely picked out Miss Sperrin and Miss Woodmont for Rory because

he, too, was not an aristocrat. She likely wouldn't have the same opinion about Avery's connection to either lady. Not that Avery cared what Lady Coyle thought.

He took another sip of his whiskey—it was far too early in the day for him to feel as tipsy as he did, but that was simply what happened when a man spent time with his male relatives—and contemplated the problem. “So you do not think it unsavory for me to choose a bride of common birth?” he asked.

“Not at all,” Caelian answered.

The rest of them gave him similar answers.

Of course, there was one vital fact that none of the others—save for Rory—knew. Miss Woodmont could never be a suitable choice for his bride. As engaging and clever as she was, and as much as Avery enjoyed her company, Miss Woodmont's fate was already sealed. At least, as far as considering her as the future Countess of Carnlough was concerned. Even though it hadn't been her fault, the woman had already ruined herself by having a child with Michael Feeney. Avery could not, in good conscience, subject the poor woman to the stress and travails of attempting to keep that dangerous secret while functioning in London society—or in County Antrim, for that matter. The moment one whisper of her sins got out, she would be ruined. And not the way Cousin Siobhan was nearly ruined either.

Fortunately, Avery's true interest lay with Miss Sperrin. She was the one who had caught his attention from the start. She was the one he thought of late at night, when he took himself in hand and contemplated the other benefits of a wife he got along well with. And if his kinsmen thought the bright and clever young woman was countess-worthy, then who was to stop him from pursuing her?

“Pardon me, my lord,” Tatum, Avery's butler, said, stepping into the room. “A Miss Sperrin is here to see you.”

Avery jolted to sit straight, splashing some of his whiskey as he did. How could the young woman have known they were talking about her? The others sat up and took notice as well.

“Send her in,” Avery said before he could think better of it and ask Tatum to show her to a more private parlor. Tatum nodded and stepped back into the hall before Avery could correct him.

“What a stroke of luck for the rest of us,” Fergus laughed as the others set their drinks down and straightened themselves out, preparing for a female guest.

“We'll assess Miss Sperrin's chances and tell you what we think,” Caelian said with a wink.

Avery felt terrible for the woman. She had no idea what she was walking into.

“Miss Sperrin, my lord,” Tatum announced her a moment later.

Miss Sperrin walked boldly into the room with a pleasant smile on her face. She opened her mouth to greet Avery, but her words and her smile froze for a moment when she saw he was not alone. For half a second, Avery thought the poor woman would dissolve into some sort of a fit and turn to run, but after only a whisper of a moment, her smile returned in full force. With it, there was a twinkle in her eyes that immediately had Avery on his guard.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said to Avery, then nodded to the others. “My lords.” She turned back to Avery, presenting the cloth sack she’d brought with her. “I’ve come to deliver the purchases you made yesterday in Belfast, since you dashed out of the shop before your order could be rung or packed.”

The sinking feeling in the pit of Avery’s stomach grew. “Thank you, Miss Sperrin,” he said with the kindest smile he could manage, stepping forward so that he could take the bag from her before the other men grew too curious.

“I took the liberty of having Mrs. O’Toole parcel up the skeins she said she had recommended for you,” Miss Sperrin went on, a devilish flash in her eyes as she peeked past him to the other men. “Since you had yet to definitively select which ones you wanted for your project.”

“What project is this?” Fergus asked, looking as delighted as it was possible for him to look.

Avery cleared his throat as Miss Sperrin handed him the bag. “Never you mind,” he said in a low growl.

“Aren’t you going to show them?” Miss Sperrin asked, looking deceptively sweet as she glanced from Avery and Fergus, then back. “I thought the colors were particularly nice.”

“Colors?” Caelian asked, his grin looking as though it would burst into full laughter.

Heat flooded Avery’s face, and he shuffled his feet as he opened the mouth of the bag. There was no getting out of it now. His kinsmen knew they had the perfect opportunity to tease him literally and figuratively in the bag, and Miss Sperrin seemed to be delighted with the fact that she could help the teasing along.

In fact, she faced the other men with a bold grin of her own—which was remarkable for a young woman in a room filled with noblemen and men of distinction—and said, “I was fortunate enough to encounter Lord Carnlough in Belfast yesterday, while on a shopping excursion.”

“And where did you encounter him?” Rory asked, as though reciting a line in a comedy to set up the punchline of a joke.

“At Mrs. O’Toole’s wool shop,” Miss Sperrin told them all with the most charming grin Avery had ever seen.

He wanted to throttle her.

He wanted to kiss her into oblivion.

And then he wanted to do it all over again.

"Mrs. O'Toole's wool shop?" Rafe asked, barely able to hide his laughter as he glanced to the others.

"Is that the lovely shop on the corner of the high street?" Caelian asked, starting to break down into laughter in earnest.

"I have been told that Lord Carnlough is quite the accomplished craftsman," Miss Sperrin said, making Avery's private shame sound like a glowing accomplishment.

Fergus's one eye suddenly went wide. "Is that where that bright green muffler you wore all last winter came from?"

Avery cleared his throat and glared at his kinsmen. That only served to have them all dissolving into laughter. Avery loathed being laughed at—although he didn't mind the sly sparkle in Miss Sperrin's eyes nearly as much as he thought he would. In fact, it made him feel rather warm, inside and out. Which, of course, presented another kind of embarrassment as his trousers suddenly felt too tight.

"Miss Sperrin, perhaps you would allow me to thank you for bringing these things in a different parlor?" he suggested, sending her a pointed look that he hoped she would interpret correctly.

"I think that would be wise," Miss Sperrin answered, sending Avery's heart soaring. She understood him without needing an explanation. "It was a pleasure meeting you all, my lords, however briefly," she said to the others, then let Avery escort her from the room.

Once they were across the hall—a journey that was accompanied by the sound of laughter bursting from the others—Avery glanced briefly into the bag.

"I hope those are the colors you wanted," Miss Sperrin said, a hint of apology in her softened voice once they were alone. "And I hope you can forgive me for a bit of teasing."

Avery glanced from the bag to her, a lightness in his chest that he could only describe as fondness. "Yes, of course," he said.

He wanted her. The truth hit him square in the chest as he took in the sight of her clever, smiling face, her pink cheeks, and her dark, flashing eyes. He couldn't be certain so early in the game, but something within him told him that Miss Sperrin was precisely the sort of woman that his kinsmen had been raving about. She was the sort of woman he could be happy with.

"Mrs. O'Toole included the bill in the bag, if you should feel the need to reimburse me for the purchase," Miss Sperrin went on when the silence between them went on for too long.

"Good Lord," Avery cursed himself, reaching into the bag. He took out the receipt and raised his eyebrows at the amount. "I am so

terribly sorry to inconvenience you this way. You most certainly did not have to settle my accounts for me or deliver the wool at all."

"I must admit, I had an ulterior motive," Miss Sperrin confessed, her smile as fetching as ever. "I did not expect you to be entertaining, however."

Another lurching throb passed through Avery's chest. Miss Sperrin had risked her reputation, in a manner of speaking, to bring him knitting wool. Young ladies generally did not call on single earls unchaperoned. It was precisely the sort of forwardness Avery loved in a woman, and at the same time, Miss Sperrin's reason for calling could be considered a simple, domestic errand. Clever indeed.

"Miss Sperrin, would you care to walk out with me sometime?" he asked before he could lose his nerve. "Perhaps on Friday? It is the least I can do to thank you, and I will have cash to reimburse you by then. And...and I would simply like to spend an afternoon with you."

Miss Sperrin's entire countenance lit up in a way that made Avery feel like a green boy with his first fascination. "I would love to, my lord," she said. The way she tilted her head down slightly and glanced up at him through her lashes was perfection.

"I will call on you Friday, then," he said. He turned to glance at the doorway and into the hall. "I would invite you to stay for a while, but as you saw, I already have company."

"And I would not wish to disturb what I am certain is quite a serious conversation," she said with mock solemnity.

Avery found himself wondering how soon it was seemly to drop to one knee and ask a woman to marry him.

"Perhaps we could discuss knitting on Friday," Miss Sperrin went on, taking a step toward the door. "I have fallen out of the habit, but I do know how."

"I'm certain we could find a great deal of more interest to discuss," Avery said. He set the bag down on one of the chairs, then held an arm out to escort Miss Sperrin into the hall and along to the front door. "Something tells me we could find quite a few things that we have in common to talk about."

"I'm certain we could," Miss Sperrin said with a smile as they stopped by the door. "Until Friday, then, Lord Carnlough."

"Until then," Avery said, unable to drag his eyes away from her. As far as he was concerned, Friday couldn't come soon enough.

Three days had never passed so slowly. Maeve was thrilled with the attention Lord Carnlough had shown her. More than that, she couldn't believe her ploy to take him the wool he'd almost purchased had worked.

"I question the wisdom of such a forward action," her mother said on Friday afternoon, as she helped Maeve style her hair and prepare for the outing, "but I cannot question the results."

"I can assure you, Mama, I had no idea that Lord Carnlough would invite me into his parlor, let alone ask to walk out with me," Maeve told her, grinning at her mother through the mirror as she put the finishing touches on Maeve's hair. "I merely intended to deliver the purchase he left behind."

It was a teeny, tiny lie. She hadn't expected anything, but she'd desperately hoped she'd be able to spend a moment alone with Lord Carnlough, in spite of the impropriety of doing so. Her mother and father were of the traditional opinion that single ladies should be kept far away from single gentlemen, and that the mingling of the sexes should only be done under careful circumstances.

That didn't mean she was unwilling to let Maeve ride out with a marriage-minded earl, however.

A careful knock sounded on Maeve's door, and their maid, Marcy, stuck her head in.

"Begging your pardon, Miss Maeve, but Lord Carnlough is here to see you," Marcy reported, stars in her eyes.

Maeve leapt up from her chair and whirled around to fetch the riding jacket she'd chosen for the occasion. Lord Carnlough had sent a note the day before asking if she knew how to ride a bicycle and to dress appropriately for the activity.

"Now Maeve," her mother said in a gently scolding voice, stepping into Maeve's path as she raced for the door, "you must behave yourself this afternoon."

"Yes, Mama, I know," Maeve said, attempting to step around her mother.

Her mother stepped into her path again. "Lord Carnlough would be

quite an impressive catch for a young woman of your station,” she went on, “but do remember that he is a member of that wicked O’Shea family.”

“I am well aware, Mama,” Maeve said with a sigh of impatience. She admired the O’Shea family and the freedom with which they lived their lives, even if they were the origin of over half of the scandals that had taken place in the county in the last two years.

“Protect your virtue at all costs,” her mother went on, chin tilted up. “Lord Carnlough has no need to marry you if you should suddenly find yourself ruined.”

Maeve narrowed her eyes a bit. “I beg your pardon, Mama?”

Her mother pursed her lips, but there was enough genuine feeling in her expression to keep Maeve from being angry with her. “You are a fine young woman from a good family. While it would be more usual for Lord Carnlough to marry a woman of his own class, if he should find his head turned with love enough to offer for you, no one will be more than passingly surprised. But a man in his station could just as easily dally with your affections and leave you bereft. And we all know what becomes of women who have fallen from the moral high ground.”

Maeve’s heart caught in her throat. As far as she knew, her mother didn’t know about little Ryan and the fall Alice had experienced. She couldn’t be hinting at that now, could she? If her mother knew, she would have forbidden Maeve from associating with Alice at all.

“I will be exceedingly careful and guard my honor with my life,” she said gravely.

Her mother rewarded her with a smile. “Good. And I have taken steps to assure that Lord Carnlough is kept in check as well.”

Maeve’s confidence faltered. “You have?”

Her mother didn’t answer right away. She merely smiled, patted Maeve’s arm as though she were proud of the accomplishment of finding an earl as a suitor, and walked with Maeve downstairs.

Maeve’s excitement dropped again as they reached the front parlor, where Lord Carnlough was waiting. He wasn’t alone. He very much wasn’t alone. Of all people, Alice was there with him, standing close as they conversed near one of the windows, smiling up at him with a flirtatious glint in her eyes.

“Alice, what are you doing here?” Maeve asked, striding across the room with the intent of slipping between her friend and her beau. “I am certain I informed you that I would be unavailable this afternoon.”

“I’m going with you,” Alice announced with a bit of predatory brightness in her eyes.

“You’re...I beg your pardon?” Maeve glanced from Alice to Lord Carnlough, who looked equally baffled by the turn of events.

"I took the liberty of inviting your dear friend Alice along as your chaperone," Maeve's mother said. She smiled and clasped her hands in front of her as though she'd accomplished a coup.

"How thoughtful and considerate of you, Mrs. Sperrin," Lord Carnlough said, taking control of the situation. "I am certain the three of us will have a lovely time this afternoon."

Lord Carnlough met Maeve's glance with a look of apology. It was a minor consolation. Maeve did her best to smile in return, hoping she could communicate with words that she would have been much happier if they were alone.

"Shall we be on our way, then?" she asked with false cheer.

"Yes," Lord Carnlough said. He glanced to Alice, then gestured for her to precede him out of the room. "I've taken the liberty of borrowing some of my cousins' bicycles for the day." He went on as they exited through the front door and onto the drive, where three bicycles waited.

"I brought my own," Alice said as she fell into step with Maeve. "Your mother warned me that we would be bicycling today. Isn't it a grand activity?"

Maeve wanted more than anything to turn to her friend and demand to know why she thought she could wedge herself into Maeve's moment. Fury was the last emotion she wanted to feel when she was off on an excursion with the man she hoped to marry. The trouble was, she was fairly certain she knew precisely what Alice's motivations were, and as angry as they made her, after what her mother had just said about the hopes of women with ruined reputations, Maeve wasn't certain she could entirely blame Alice for her actions.

"I thought we could ride out to a small tea shop I know near Carnlough Beach," Lord Carnlough said once they were all mounted on their bicycles and pedaling down the drive. "It is run by a tenant of mine, though it is several miles from my estate. The view of the sea is quite lovely."

Maeve opened her mouth to say it sounded divine, but Alice beat her to it.

"I cannot wait," she blurted with a smile. "I have been told your estate is quite lovely, and I am looking forward to seeing it."

Maeve's mouth remained open in shock. She glared at Alice when she was certain Lord Carnlough wasn't watching her. Alice was supposed to be her friend, not her rival.

The only thing that stopped Maeve from bursting with frustration was when Lord Carnlough turned to look at her over his shoulder as he rode slightly ahead of them and said, "You ride well, Miss Sperrin."

Maeve forced herself to keep her head about her and to be nothing

but sunshine and graciousness. "I am new to bicycle riding, my lord, but when I gave it a try for the first time last year, I found I quite enjoyed it."

"Me too," Alice added with a smile to match Maeve's. "We learned to ride together. It was quite a relief to get out of the house and to try something fun after...after a lingering illness."

Twin emotions of nostalgia and irritation flashed through Maeve. They had enjoyed learning to ride bicycles together. Maeve couldn't remember when she'd laughed so hard. That would have been a perfect summer, but for the melancholy Alice experienced from early motherhood, secret-keeping, and not being able to spend enough time with Ryan. She wondered why Alice had been so cagey by telling Lord Carnlough she'd suffered an illness. The man knew about Ryan. Perhaps Alice was hoping he'd forgotten so that he'd see her as a potential bride.

"I'm rather new to the exercise myself," Lord Carnlough said, slowing down a bit so that he could ride by Maeve's and Alice's sides. "I'm used to riding horses. But I must admit, there is a definite freedom in propelling oneself this way. I consider bicycle riding quite the accomplishment, particularly in a woman."

"Do you?" Alice brightened, batting her eyelashes at him. "Then watch this."

Alice burst forward, outpacing Maeve and Lord Carnlough and displaying not only her bicycle-riding skills, but her boldness and daring. Maeve risked a sideways glance at Lord Carnlough, and when she saw the light of amusement in his eyes, she knew she had to act.

"Last one to the tea shop is a damp squib," she laughed, pushing harder on the peddles and speeding forward.

There was something about racing over the green hills and meadows that lifted Maeve's spirits, in spite of the way she'd been disappointed. The afternoon might not turn out as she'd hoped, but she could still enjoy herself. Alice was most certainly showing off as she flew down a sloping hill, laughing openly, but Lord Carnlough stayed close to Maeve's side instead of racing off to join her.

It was the perfect day for a bicycle outing as well. The skies were grey and cloudy, but that simply meant there wasn't a great deal of sun glare to spoil the fun. A breeze blew in from the sea, rippling the grass like waves and helping to cool Maeve as she exerted herself. She doubted the hairstyle her mother had fixed for her would stay in place, even with a hat pinned firmly to her head, but that didn't seem to matter as they rode on, enjoying themselves.

"I like a woman who isn't afraid to race a bicycle across a country road," Lord Carnlough called to Maeve as they rounded the crest of another hill. They were finally able to see the sea in the distance. "I

admire bravery in a woman,” he added with a wink for her.

Maeve’s heart soared. “And I like a man who doesn’t think a woman should be kept in the home as a domestic ornament,” Maeve called in reply.

“Yes, that fashion has become a little too popular for my tastes in this day and age,” Lord Carnlough said.

“If it’s speed and courage you admire,” Alice interrupted, proving that she’d been listening in on the conversation, even though she rode several yards ahead of them, “I will show you that.” She glanced over her shoulder with a wicked look for Lord Carnlough, then said to Maeve, “I doubt you can keep up with me.”

It was a challenge if ever Maeve had heard one. When Alice pushed forward to speed down the hill, Maeve thrust herself into action and followed her. Immediately, they were engaged in a race with the most valuable prize of all, Lord Carnlough.

Maeve kept up with Alice, but it took a great deal of effort. She was overheated and damp in spite of the breeze as they raced down the hill. She didn’t like the gritty look of determination in Alice’s eyes either, or the way she seemed to have lost all friendly feelings in her desperation to catch Lord Carnlough’s eye. Maeve wished she could stop her friend, take her aside, and assure her that Lord Carnlough wasn’t the last chance she would ever have, and that, in spite of Ryan, she was exactly what so many men would want for a wife.

Alice seemed determine to win at all costs, though. It was all Maeve could do to keep up with her as they rounded a corner at the bottom of the hill, speeding onto a stretch where sand covered part of the road.

Maeve knew disaster was about to strike as soon as she hit the sand. She’d been peddling so fast and had picked up even more speed on the downward slope, and as soon as the bicycle’s tires slipped on the sand, she lost control of the vehicle. Try as she did to grip the handlebars and keep the contraption straight, between the sand and the curve of the road, it was a lost cause. She went careening off the path and into the grass.

The bicycle hit something in the grass, and for one heart-stopping moment, Maeve thought that was the end. She was thrown from the bicycle and flew several feet before crashing with a thump in a thick tuft of grass and late-summer wildflowers. The blow of her landing knocked the wind out of her and sent bruising pain through her gut and limbs. She tried to block her fall with her arms, but that only resulted in a sharp, twisting pain in her left wrist.

“Miss Sperrin, are you well?” Lord Carnlough shouted. He steered his bicycle to the side of the road where Maeve had taken her spill, leapt off, and ran toward her.

Maeve groaned as she muscled herself to a sitting position. “I...I think so,” she said, panting.

Alice stopped farther down the road. Her eyes went wide when she saw what had happened to Maeve. As fast as lightning, she turned her bicycle around and peddled back to where Maeve had crashed.

“Are you hurt?” she called out to Maeve as she, too, abandoned her bicycle by the side of the road and rushed to Maeve’s aid.

“I don’t think I am seriously hurt,” Maeve said, groaning more as Lord Carnlough slipped an arm around her back and helped her to stand. “I slid on the sand covering the road and lost control of the bicycle,” she admitted.

Lord Carnlough walked her back to the side of the road, near where the bicycles had been abandoned, and helped her to sit again. “We cannot be too careful,” he said, fussing over her in a way that brought pink to Maeve’s cheeks. “Rest for a moment so that you can be certain you aren’t seriously injured.”

Maeve nodded, grateful for the opportunity to catch her breath.

“Are you certain you’re alright?” Alice asked, a look of calculation coming into her eyes as she peeked from Maeve to Lord Carnlough.

“Yes, I think so,” Maeve said.

She didn’t think about her words or how Alice might take them. She assumed her friend would call off her games and her efforts to win Lord Carnlough over. But as it turned out, she’d underestimated the depth of Alice’s desperation or the lengths her friend would go to where her last chance at marriage was concerned.

“We should ride back into town and fetch help, my lord,” she said, stepping closer to Lord Carnlough’s side.

Maeve nearly gasped at the boldness of Alice’s gambit. She was trying to get Lord Carnlough on his own.

“That might not be necessary,” Lord Carnlough said, his attention still focused on Maeve. “Miss Sperrin’s injuries might not be as bad as all that. We should simply wait and rest for a few more moments to see if she recovers. Do you agree, Miss Sperrin?” He glanced to Maeve with a look of deep concern.

Maeve smiled back at him—even though an ominous roll of thunder in the distance told her sitting and waiting might not be a long-term solution. “I think that’s all I need,” she said.

“How are your extremities?” Lord Carnlough asked, shifting to crouch beside her. “Are your ankles intact? Are all of your limbs still in place?”

Maeve’s smile widened. The man was flirting with her. Two could play at that game. “Perhaps you should test them, my lord,” she said.

“Perhaps I should,” he replied with a deliciously wicked look. “May I have your permission to ascertain the stability of your ankles?”

Maeve's heart fluttered in her chest. "You may," she said with mock formality.

She considered herself as wicked as any O'Shea as Lord Carnlough slipped his hand beneath the hem of her skirt and closed it around one of her ankles. He was gentleman enough to actually check to see whether her ankle was injured by maneuvering it this way and that. Maeve didn't feel a bit of pain. In fact, what sensations she felt were as far from pain as could be.

"And now the other one," Lord Carnlough went on.

He brushed his hand farther up her calf than he should have while ostensibly testing her other ankle. Maeve caught her breath, shocked by her own boldness, and also by how much she loved it and how natural it felt.

"I feel better than ever, my lord," she said in a breathless voice.

Lord Carnlough answered with a low, rumbling laugh that caused an ache to form in her core. "I think we will make it through, Miss Sperrin."

It would have been a perfect moment, but for the fact that Maeve caught Alice moving around the bicycles out of the corner of her eye. More than that, Alice had removed one of her hat pins, and, while she must have thought no one was watching her, she stabbed the pin into the front tire of Maeve's bicycle.

Maeve was so shocked by the sabotage—and, admittedly, curious about what her friend intended by it—that she couldn't find the words to say anything. Lord Carnlough noticed her change in expression, though.

"You do seem to be somewhat hurt," he said. Another rumble of thunder sounded. He glanced up at the skies, then said, "I think it would be wise to move you to a place of shelter."

"I saw a small cottage a ways back from the road," Alice said, moving back toward them. "Unfortunately, it appears Maeve punctured the tire of your cousin's bicycle in her accident, but if we take her to that cottage for shelter, you and I could ride back into Ballymena, or perhaps to your estate, to fetch a wagon to convey her and the bicycle home."

Understanding dawned in Maeve's mind. That was Alice's aim. She wanted to deposit Maeve out of the way so that she and Lord Carnlough could play the heroes together.

"The idea has merit," Lord Carnlough said, rocking back and standing. Maeve's heart sank. "Are you well enough to stand, Miss Sperrin?"

"I am," Maeve said. She would have said so even if both of her ankles were broken and she were bleeding copiously.

"Come on, then." Lord Carnlough offered her a hand.

Maeve took it, glad her wrist didn't seem to be broken, and stood. Thunder rumbled again, and spits of rain started to fall down on them. Through it all, Alice looked delighted.

"Should we go, then?" she smiled at Lord Carnlough.

Instead of jumping to her scheme, Lord Carnlough rubbed a hand over his face and glanced around in thought. "I think that you should ride back and send help to us, Miss Woodmont," he said. "It would be the best and easiest course of action. I see the cottage you mentioned over there." He nodded to a small building by a cluster of trees half a mile or so off the road to one side. "Miss Sperrin and I will wait for whatever help you can send there."

"I—" Alice's smile vanished. She glanced between Maeve and Lord Carnlough for a moment, then frowned at Maeve. "I suppose so," she said in a tight voice. "If this is the *last chance* we have for things to turn out right."

Lord Carnlough looked confused by Alice's odd statement. Maeve knew exactly what her friend was trying to communicate.

Thunder sounded closer. This time, Maeve saw the lightning that went along with it. "We'd better act, whatever we choose to do," she said. "It would be terrible to be caught out in a storm."

"You are right," Lord Carnlough said. "Miss Woodmont, please be safe as you fetch help. Until we meet again."

He nodded, and that was the end of that. Alice had no choice but to retrieve her bicycle and start back the way they'd come. Maeve was only partially happy that Alice had finally seen reason and left her and Lord Carnlough alone. The rest of her was deeply worried, not just for Alice's safety in the storm, but over what her friend could possibly be thinking to pull the sort of stunt she'd just attempted.

There were a great many things in life that Avery didn't feel he was prepared for. He hadn't been prepared to take over the earldom, or to have his father die when he was barely thirty. He hadn't been prepared to take up his father's seat in Parliament either. And he hadn't been prepared to play umpire to Miss Sperrin and Miss Woodmont as the two friends vied for his attention.

"Are you certain you're fit enough to walk to the cottage?" he asked Miss Sperrin, his gaze fixed on Miss Woodmont's back as she rode away across the rolling countryside. "We could abandon the bicycles for now and I could carry you, if you feel the need."

Miss Sperrin laughed—her laughter was a lovely sound that went straight to his groin—and shook her head. "I think I can manage pushing a bicycle over such a short distance. My wrist feels slightly tender, but that won't stop me from walking. Though I am glad you've taken charge of the one with the punctured tire."

That had been an easy decision to make. Pushing a bicycle with a flat tire required more effort than pushing one with two working wheels, so they'd switched for the quick journey.

"We should hurry then," he said, nodding to the cottage.

It wasn't just the rivalry between Miss Sperrin and Miss Woodmont that bothered Avery. Women and their friendships were an utter, baffling mystery to him, but even he could sense that the tension between the two women was not good. He hated problems that he didn't know how to solve. Just as he bristled with discomfort whenever a woman showed him more regard than he was willing to return.

Fortunately for him, the storm that appeared to be rolling in from the west and spattering him and Miss Sperrin with rain as they raced with increasing urgency toward the remote cottage required all of his attention.

"It doesn't appear as though anyone is home," Miss Sperrin said as they reached the cottage and rested the bicycles against one of its walls. "What should we do?"

Avery frowned up at the sky as the rain began to come down

harder. Miss Sperrin was correct in that the cottage looked unoccupied. He didn't see any lamps lit inside, and there was no smoke coming from the chimney. He was certain the cottage wasn't abandoned, though. They were on his own land now, and the cottage belonged to one of his tenants.

Which was why he felt no compunctions about trying the door handle and letting the two of them inside after his repeated knocking went unanswered. Sure enough, the cottage was clearly lived in, but whoever occupied it wasn't at home, and evidently hadn't been at home all day.

"Are you certain we should be here?" Miss Sperrin asked in a hushed voice as she stepped closer to the fireplace, hugging herself. She was damp from rain, though the skies hadn't opened up enough for her to be soaked.

As soon as Avery had that thought, the heavens burst and the rain which had been light moments before turned torrential. A flash of lightning, followed by booming thunder, broke through the awkward silence.

Avery smirked. "I believe we are left with a choice of house-breaking or standing outside in the middle of this storm. I will leave the choice to you, Miss Sperrin."

Warmth spilled through him as Miss Sperrin burst into laughter. "I suppose house-breaking it is," she said, continuing on toward the fireplace.

Avery made certain the cottage door was secure behind him, and he glanced out one of the front windows to assess the strength of the storm. He and Miss Sperrin had been incredibly lucky to find shelter before the worst began. A few minutes later, and they would have been soaked to the bone.

Avery was also glad to see that Miss Sperrin didn't appear to have suffered any lasting damage in her bicycle crash. Her wrist appeared to be well on its way to recovery, judging by the way she moved it. She'd been stunned, that much had been obvious, but not so stunned that she hadn't been able to engage in a bit of shameless flirtation with him.

She knelt in front of the fireplace now, moving some of the logs from the nearby pile as if she intended to light a fire. Between the ease of her movement and the deliberateness of her action, Avery was satisfied that she had come out of her crash with only bruises. He rather fancied the idea of exploring where those bruises might show up on her body.

"You know how to light a fire?" he asked, strolling to stand beside the fireplace. He went so far as to cross his arms and lean against the wall beside it in a rakish pose.

Miss Sperrin sent him a fetching look, her dark eyes dancing with mischief. "Of course, I do," she said, resting the logs against each other so that they would catch easily, then stuffing the spaces with kindling. "I am not a delicate society miss, after all." A flash of concern crossed her beautiful face, taking her smile away, much to Avery's regret. "I hope you do not hold that against me, my lord."

Avery could think of quite a few things that he would have liked to hold against the feisty and alluring Miss Sperrin. "If you are referring to the difference in our class," he said, facing the issue head on, "then no. I will confess that said difference has not influenced my regard for you at all."

Miss Sperrin blushed so fiercely that it set Avery's heart pounding. "Thank you for your magnanimity, my lord," she said, then underlined her gratitude by glancing up at him with one of the wickedest and most inviting glances Avery had ever had the pleasure of being on the receiving end of.

He wondered if she was flirting shamelessly with him as a way to seduce him, perhaps all the way into marriage. From the start, he'd had a feeling that that was what Miss Woodmont had been doing. He didn't feel the same sense of manipulation from Miss Sperrin, though. All indications were that Miss Sperrin was genuinely taken with him, and that her flirtations were for her own enjoyment and his, not that they were a weapon she wielded to get her way.

He loved that.

"I think that, considering our dire circumstances," he said, glancing around the cottage with mock seriousness, "we should dispense with formalities and titles for now."

"And what does that mean to you, my lord?" Miss Sperrin asked with a cheeky, sideways grin. She found a box of matches beside the fireplace and took one out to set her handiwork alight.

"Call me Avery," he said, well aware of the sensual purr in his voice. Two could play the flirtation game.

Whether it was the sudden flame of the fire as the logs caught or delight at his naughty demand, Miss Sperrin's face glowed. She finished with the fire, making certain it would stay lit, then stood.

She was a good six inches shorter than him, but Avery felt as though they stood on completely equal ground as she said, "Well, Avery, if that is how you wish to proceed, then I insist you call me Maeve."

Avery's heart—and a baser organ—swelled. Every bit of social advice and etiquette said that he should abhor a forward woman, that he should want a fine lady who was too delicate to speak to a man as an equal, but that advice was rubbish. All those moralizing pamphlets and priggish expectations could go to hell. He liked Maeve's moxie.

He liked her flashing, brown eyes and her lithe, shapely form too. Devil though it made him, now that they were alone for an indeterminate amount of time—the storm showed absolutely no sign of letting up any time soon—he desperately wanted to seduce her.

“Tell me, Maeve,” he said as they stared at each other across the newly-lit fire, “how is it that a gem like you is still unwed?”

It was a shocking thing for him to ask, but he wanted to set the standard for their interactions then and there. He was not interested in holding back his true feelings, and he had no wish for her to hold back either. As far as he was concerned, the nature and content of Maeve’s answer to such an inappropriate question would determine if he would ask her another, life-changing question.

Maeve’s clever grin mellowed into something softer and a bit wistful. “It isn’t that I have never had an offer made to me,” she said, stepping away from the fireplace and over to the side of the cottage that served as a kitchen. She held out her hand to the stove, then set to work checking the firebox and preparing to light that fire. “I have refused two offers in the past—one when I was only eighteen because I was far too young to marry, and one just last year.”

“Last year?” Avery asked, suddenly feeling as though he wanted to find whomever that man was and wring his neck. He followed her to the stove, and as she worked to load the firebox with coal and kindling, he handed her what she needed.

Maeve glanced up at him. “I wasn’t in love with the man,” she said.

Avery shrugged. “Forgive me, but at your age, many other women would accept a proposal, whether they loved the man or not, simply to be settled.”

Maeve smiled, but there was a sad edge to it. “I could not do that to Alice,” she said quietly. “She has had a rough row to hoe, as I believe you know.” She glanced at him again as she finished setting the stove’s fire. Avery had taken up the box of matches on the sill beside the stove, and she directed him to light the fire with a gesture. “If I had accepted that offer of marriage, I wouldn’t have been able to be there for her. And Alice desperately needs someone to be her champion.”

Avery was surprised at how touching her admission was. He struck a match, then lit the stove. “Your devotion to your friend is admirable.”

“Thank you,” Maeve said, her eyes still downcast. “Sometimes I wonder....”

She let her sentence hang as she walked away from the kitchen area and back toward the fireplace. The stove would take an hour or more to be hot enough to boil water for tea—or to cook a supper,

which could become a concern, if the storm kept on the way it was—but the fireplace was warm enough to dry the rain from their clothes.

Avery followed Maeve once again, taking up a position opposite her at the fireplace. “I should mention that I have been awkwardly aware of the way Miss Woodmont has set her heart on me,” he said in a quiet voice, glancing at Maeve with a wince.

Maeve raised her head to meet his eyes, looking embarrassed. “I was hoping it wasn’t that obvious.”

Avery grinned uncomfortably. “Believe me, it is obvious.”

“I’m so sorry,” Maeve said with a wince. “You do understand her motivations for hoping, though, I trust. You know about Ryan.”

He nodded. “Her hopes are perfectly understandable. But I am afraid Miss Woodmont is chasing after a lost cause where I am concerned. While I do not personally take offense to her son, I could not, in good conscience, put any woman in a position as my countess that would subject her to the kind of scrutiny and prejudice she would inevitably encounter.”

Maeve’s face went even softer, causing Avery’s heart to race. He might not have been an expert where emotions were concerned, but he could see he’d impressed her.

“Besides,” he went on, sliding closer to her and daring to brush his fingertips across her cheek, “my heart’s interests were immediately taken elsewhere.”

He hesitated for only a moment before taking a chance and leaning toward her. Maeve took in a breath, parted her lips, then, at the last minute, pulled away. She walked away from him, heading back to the kitchen.

“What would you like for supper, Avery?” she asked, tossing a coquettish look over her shoulder, her hips swaying. “Certainly, there is enough here that we can devise a satisfying meal.”

Avery’s blood heated, and his trousers grew tight. He wanted Maeve like he’d never wanted any other woman. Few other women had turned down his kiss, then led him on with a silent promise of more.

“Can you cook as well as ride a bicycle and bring a man to his knees with just a few words?” he asked as he moved to sit against the back of the sofa that demarcated the living area of the cottage from the kitchen.

Maeve sent him another, sly look, over her other shoulder this time, like she was a cat playing with a mouse before she would devour it. “I have a great many skills that you have yet to discover.” She turned back to the kitchen, and immediately her playful, siren-like demeanor dropped. “But no, I am not much of a cook. At least, not when the stove isn’t hot enough to so much as boil water.”

Avery found the way she gave up her flirtations in favor of practicality as endearing as any effort at seduction she could have made. "Let's see what we can find," he said, pushing away from the sofa and into the kitchen.

The cottage was definitely lived in. The cupboard that served as a pantry was stocked with several sorts of canned goods and fruits and vegetables preserved in glass jars. There was plenty of flour, butter, and lard for baking, as well as dried beans, and even some fresh vegetables that must have come out of a garden only days before. There was even half a loaf of bread that was only a tiny bit stale, milk that had not yet gone bad, and enough tea to brew a pot as soon as the stove was warm enough to boil a kettle.

Neither of them were proficient cooks, but after an hour or so, as the storm continued in its intensity outside, they had managed to construct a small, unusual feast of tea, toast, roasted vegetables, and cold ham for their supper.

"I am quite proud of our efforts," Maeve said as they sat across the cottage's small table from each other. She buttered a piece of toast and placed it on his plate. "Neither of us will go to bed hungry tonight."

Her words could have been completely innocent, but the way she delivered them with a smile had Avery hoping and praying that they would go to bed together, and that they wouldn't sleep. It was outrageous of him to think so. Maeve was a respectable woman, not one of the courtesans he used to visit in London when the idea of free love was new to him. He shouldn't let his thoughts wander straight to seduction.

But when she bit into her toast and a bit of melted butter dribbled across her lips and chin, he nearly unmanned himself. He was grateful that the table hid the intensity of his erection.

"So tell me, Lord Carnlough," she said with teasing formality. "I have shared with you, so you must share with me. Why are you unmarried at the ripe age of...?" She arched one eyebrow.

"Thirty-two," he filled in for her with a cheeky look to answer hers. "I am unmarried because I have been far too busy debauching myself in London brothels and bringing disgrace on the O'Shea family name."

He waited to see if she would blanch, but instead, Maeve merely shrugged one shoulder and said, "I would think that it would be difficult to besmirch the O'Shea family name when said family already has more scandals than the Queen has tiaras."

Avery laughed out loud. He couldn't help himself. He knew she wasn't disparaging the family. In fact, he had the impression from the sparkle in her eyes that she admired the O'Shea's propensity for

trouble. Every thing Maeve did and everything she said convinced him more and more that she was the woman for him.

"No, in truth," he said, slicing through his ham, "the reason I haven't married yet is because my life hasn't allowed me two seconds to settle in for the search. I am not certain how much you are aware of, but my father was ill for quite some time. I went straight from university to helping my sister, Angeline, care for him in his final days. I had a great deal to learn about managing an estate, and about the business of Parliament. Particularly as the Irish Question is far from solved, depending on who you ask."

"I see," Maeve said, nodding as if she did, indeed, understand. "You've had quite a lot of responsibility piled on your shoulders, and at an earlier age than most."

Avery's back and shoulders relaxed, and joy filled him at her thoughtfulness and patience. "It has been something of a point of conflict between me and some of my London friends," he went on, in the mood to confess everything to her.

"Oh?" She paused with her teacup halfway to her lips, genuine interest in her eyes.

Avery finished cutting his ham, took a bite, chewed it, and thought about his answer. "I am no different from any other young man with a title and a bit of wealth," he confessed. "I enjoy a good bit of naughty fun now and then. My friends enjoy it as well, so they did not react entirely kindly when I passed over their invitations for nights on the town or weekends of debauchery to study land management or to visit my father."

"You chose being a good son and a responsible nobleman over excess and pleasure," she said, her eyes glowing with admiration.

That glow was more intoxicating than any wine and more alluring than the sultriest face paint or lowest-cut bodice. "In a way, I felt as though I had no choice," he said. "But in another way, I chose my father and my responsibility over empty fun. Even though I resented it at times."

"And why shouldn't you have fun now and then?" Maeve asked. "You are young. Life cannot be all stodginess and duty."

He stared at her, amazed. "So it doesn't bother you that I have a somewhat checkered past?"

She grinned at him. "I will be forever jealous of the other women who have heard your unfettered laughter or tasted your lips."

Her mention of lips drew Avery's gaze directly to her own. They were pink and full, and still glistening slightly from the butter on her toast. He was suddenly overcome with the urge to kiss her. It pushed all other thoughts from his mind.

"You've nothing at all to be jealous about," he said, his voice

dropping to a rich baritone. "I can't remember a single one of them. I thought I was destined to be a hapless rake and that any marriage I might enter into would be a tedious chore that I would be forced to endure for the continuation of the family name, but since meeting you, I have reconsidered that notion."

"Have you?" There was just enough uncertainty and hope in Maeve's voice to drive Avery to the height of arousal. Once again, she had surprised him, this time by letting something pure and artless flash into her eyes. She had such a good soul encased in an attractive body and accented by a quick and clever mind.

"Yes," he said, setting down his knife and fork and lifting slightly out of his chair. "I most certainly have."

He stood just enough to lean over the small table, surging close to her. Even better, his movements took her completely by surprise. She gasped, which parted her perfect lips, and before she could tease him again by pulling away, he slanted his mouth over hers.

Maeve was utterly surprised by Avery's kiss. It was beautiful

and intoxicating, and it was far and away the most magical kiss she'd ever received. But what sort of man kissed a woman while leaning over a supper table? Maeve had the last of her toast in one hand and a fork with a bit of ham in the other. In spite of all that, it was somehow the most romantic kiss she'd ever received. Not that there had been many.

"Oh, my," she gasped when Avery pulled back and stood. He appeared to have a difficult time steadying himself for a moment as he gazed languidly into Maeve's eyes. Maeve set down her toast and fork and pressed her fingertips to her lips.

"Delicious," Avery said, his lips moving into a hungry smile. "I've never kissed a woman who tastes of butter and salt before.

Maeve burst into a snorting giggle. It was the most undignified sound she could have made, and she clapped her hand even harder over her mouth. She couldn't stop giggling once she'd started.

For some reason, that seemed to delight Avery. "I do believe I need more," he said, stepping around the table.

He moved to the side of her chair, then held out a hand to her. Maeve's heart ran riot in her chest. She simply could not believe the situation she found herself in. Outside the cottage, a storm was raging. Rain still beat against the roof and the windows, making a sound that brought to mind gothic adventures and perilous situations. Inside, the cottage was cozy, now that the fires in the fireplace and the stove were burning away, and her belly was just full enough of simple fare without being overly full.

And there was Avery—strong, handsome, mischievous, and as naughty as all the rumors she'd ever heard about him. His green eyes sparkled with seduction and seemed to call to her to join in the debauchery. She should have been terrified, or at least offended that he would importune her the way he clearly wanted to. She should behave as a young woman of breeding and class would and turn down the offer that seemed to permeate every part of Avery and fill the space between them.

Instead, she took his warm hand and allowed him to help her to stand.

"This evening continues to be highly irregular," she said in a quiet, breathless voice.

She felt silly for saying something so banal, but that embarrassment was banished completely when Avery drew her into his arms and slanted his mouth over hers again.

She melted into him, letting out a sound of surprise and excitement. His arms were firm around her, supporting and cherishing her. She rested her hands on the broad expanse of his chest for a moment, feeling the rapid beat of his heart under her right hand. He was so warm and inviting, and he, too, tasted of butter and tea and salt and all the things she loved. And his kiss was magnificent. He knew precisely how to mold his lips to hers, how to brush his tongue against her lower lip, then invade her just enough to leave her wanting more without overwhelming her. Maeve had never kissed anyone like that before. It felt like a prelude to the blending two souls together, like Alice had told her intercourse felt like.

Maeve sucked in a sudden breath, shuddering in Avery's arms as he switched up the way he kissed her and stroked a hand along the side of her face. It was exactly like Alice had described. Seductive, irresistible, and everything she had ever dreamed of and wanted. In a flash, she understood. As she slid her hands across Avery's chest and around to his sides, gripping handfuls of his jacket as their mouths continued to meld with bruising kisses, she understood how her friend could have ended up in the unfortunate situation she was in. She understood why every woman who had ever ruined her reputation for a man could end up falling. It would be so blissfully easy to fall—and to enjoy every second of that fall—if it meant she could have this burning, hungry feeling within her, and if she could have the satisfaction she knew Avery could give her.

"You are the most delicious thing I have ever tasted," Avery growled deep in his throat. He moved his hands to brush across her sides, cupping her breast with one hand through the fabric of her bodice and corset. "You are the most exciting woman I've ever met and the cleverest. I've wanted you almost from the moment we met."

Maeve answered with a vocal sigh, but she couldn't form her thoughts into words. So much ruin rested in her arms, and she had never wanted anything more in her life. She leaned into Avery when he kissed her again, reaching up to thread her fingers through his soft, flame-red hair. Everything about him was bold and dangerous and manly. He was everything she had ever dreamed of.

"I think it's safe to say that our supper is over," Avery murmured between kisses, lavishing her cheeks and even her nose with kisses

before capturing her lips again. His statement was underscored by a crash of thunder from close by, but Maeve wasn't certain she would have noticed if the cottage itself had been struck by lightning. In that moment, she felt as though she were the one who had been struck. "I believe our pudding awaits us in the bedroom," Avery went on, dropping his voice to a leonine purr.

Maeve trembled, her body and heart crying out for everything Avery had just promised her. The sensations in her most delicate places were wildly enjoyable, and if everything Alice had ever told her was true, those sensations could expand and fill her and change her world. Right or wrong, proper or scandalous, she wanted to give herself to Avery O'Shea like she'd never wanted anything before.

She glanced up into Avery's fiery eyes, reveling in the invitation they held. She had the most important choice of her lifetime right there in her arms, as Alice had once had with Michael Feeney. She had the choice to back away and follow the rules that society had laid out for her and for every young woman, or to throw caution—and possibly her reputation—to the wind to become the sort of woman that mothers warned their daughters about and that old biddies whispered about behind their fans with disapproving stares. She had a choice of whether to soar in the arms of pleasure or to plod along like a good girl.

It wasn't really much of a choice for her, even though it should have been.

"I'm yours," she said gazing up at Avery as she placed her palms on his chest again. "God help me, I should resist a naughty earl like you, but I find that I have no wish to turn away from you whatsoever. Ruin me, my lord. Ruin me thoroughly. But make it worth my while," she added with a cheeky wink.

"Absolutely," Avery said, breathless and radiating excitement himself.

He swept Maeve into his arms, earning a short yelp that turned into a laugh from her, then strode across the main room of the cottage to the bedroom in a few, quick strides. The bedroom was clean and quaint, but that was all Maeve cared about as Avery lay her on the narrow bed. She almost protested when he pulled away from her, until she realized he'd only done it so that he could unlace and remove her boots, then kick off his own shoes and wriggle out of his jacket and waistcoat.

One of the things that she and Alice had giggled about late into the nights that they'd stayed up talking about Michael and what had happened, and how neither she nor Alice were opposed to those sorts of things happening again, was how terribly inconvenient the act of removing clothing was when the eagerness to proceed to pleasure was

in play. Maeve nearly laughed aloud at how accurate Alice's description of undressing in a hurry was.

"There needs to be an easier way to accomplish this," she told Avery breathlessly, working through the buttons of her riding jacket and blouse as he reached under her skirt to pull down her stocking. That act alone had her wriggling and eager to get the whole thing over with.

"It makes the habits of Naturalists or the loose clothing of the Pre-Raphaelites seem like a wise idea, doesn't it?" he laughed along with her.

"I don't want the deliciousness of the moment to disappear into practicality," she confessed as she squirmed to remove her jacket, then her bodice.

"Do you mean this deliciousness?" Avery asked.

He'd straightened so that he could remove his shirt and unbutton his trousers, but he leaned forward, half covering Maeve with his body, and sought out her mouth for another kiss. Maeve gasped, then hummed in appreciation as their lips and tongues tangled again, and as her hands rested on his bare chest. Swirls of pleasure pulsed through her at the feel of his warm skin and the wiry hair that covered him in just the right amount. Her senses rocketed to their fullest heights all over again, and the ache in her core throbbed wildly for attention.

"Yes," she sighed, roughly flopping back against the pillows as their kiss ended. "Yes, that's the deliciousness I am after. Dear God, please get these wretched clothes off of me as quickly as possible."

Avery laughed, then set about fulfilling her request. As she reached around to the fastenings of her skirt, he made quick work of the hooks of her corset. Between the two of them, they managed to free her from her layers of restrictive clothing. Maeve considered that she should have been embarrassed to be naked in front of an earl with a wicked reputation, but when he lowered himself to rain kisses across the mounds of her breasts, then took one of her nipples into his mouth to suckle and lick it, all rational thought left her head.

She gasped in shock, then moaned like an utter wanton as he treated her to some of the most delicious feelings she'd ever felt in her life. Her breasts felt more sensitive than she'd ever known them to be as he explored one nipple with his mouth while caressing her other breast. When he very carefully pinched her free nipple, she cried out and nearly arched off the bed.

"Too much?" he asked with a suddenly concerned look.

"Not nearly enough," she panted. She hoped that he could see in her eyes how much she'd enjoyed that mischievous little pinch. He certainly had to know how much she was enjoying their wicked

experience when she grabbed his face with both hands and pulled him to her for another deep kiss.

She didn't even mind when Avery laughed at that kiss. "If I had known how eager you'd be, I would have seduced you much sooner," he said, drawing back with an impish wink.

"This is wonderful," she panted. "I want more of it. I want more of you."

"Whatever could you mean by that?" he teased her.

As if to answer his own question, he rocked back and stood so that he could shuck his trousers. Maeve sucked in a breath, then couldn't seem to breath at all as his stiff penis leapt up in all its masculine glory. She'd seen pictures and Alice had described what she knew before, but nothing compared to the sight of the real thing. Maeve couldn't decide if it was beautiful or hilarious.

Avery had no qualms at all about showing her his pride and joy. He climbed back onto the bed, straddling her hips so that she had a very close and incredibly detailed look at him.

"You are more than welcome to touch," he said, wickedness glinting in his eyes. "In fact, I will admit to being an utter devil by saying I wish you would. No, I'll go further," he said, reaching for her hand and bringing it to his prick. Maeve gasped at the feel of it—hard and hot, but also silken in a way, with moisture beaded on the end—and closed her hand around the shaft. "I hope to teach you how to stroke and suck me, how to bring me to climax with your hands and with your lovely mouth."

Maeve's mouth dropped open at the bold statement as she glanced up with him. She could hardly breath with excitement.

Avery growled as his eyes focused on her mouth. "You tempt me, my dear," he said in a rough voice, "but tonight is not about my wicked desires. Tonight is about introducing you to all of the naughty things that are yours and yours alone to enjoy."

"Such as?" Maeve asked, her voice shaking.

Avery grinned and arched one eyebrow at her. He then shifted his position, moving toward her feet. She parted her legs a bit so he could have room to kneel, but as soon as she did, with a devilish look in his eyes that she felt in the heart of her body, he grabbed hold of her ankles and pulled them apart even more.

In an instant, he had her legs wide open, and when he pushed her ankles up in a way that made her feel that she must have looked like a frog, she couldn't catch her breath. And that was nothing to the way she felt when he bent forward to kiss her in the most intimate way possible. No, not to kiss her, to lavish her sex with strokes of his tongue and the brush of his fingertips. Her body soared with pleasure as he thrust his tongue into her in a way she should have thought was

obscene, but that had her gripping the bedcovers beside her and arching into him.

It was all so maddeningly wonderful, and although a large part of her wanted to enjoy it for as long as possible, she felt her orgasm flying up into her with the speed of the storm that crashed around them. Before she could so much as consider whether it was proper or whether he would think less of her for coming so hard so fast, her body jolted into throbbing tremors of pleasure that had her crying out and surrendering herself fully to him.

That in itself was pure bliss, but when Avery groaned in triumph, then shifted to stretch his body atop hers, positioning himself carefully and thrusting inside of her, a whole new wave of sensation washed through her. Alice had warned her of the discomfort of the moment virginity was lost, but had also told her that it was fleeting and everything that came after was worth it. She was absolutely correct in that, but for the fact that it didn't hurt nearly as much as she'd been led to believe it would. That moment of something tearing was no worse than the spill she'd taken from the bicycle that afternoon, and when Avery paused while filling her, checked her expression, then began to move, apparently satisfied with whatever he saw in her, Maeve clung to him and moved with him, happier than she'd ever been in her life.

It was a different sort of pleasure than orgasm, but the bliss of being filled and claimed by a man had her sighing and moaning in time to his strong thrusts. She had an inclination that Avery was an aggressive, demanding lover who enjoyed mastering his partners, but there was absolutely nothing wrong with that, as far as she was concerned. Far from it. The way he claimed her with his thrusts, gazing down at her with possessiveness as he did, had her feeling like the most beautiful woman in the world.

It was so good that her body treated her to a second burst of deep, throbbing pleasure as Avery's sounds and thrusts grew pitched. She was convinced she'd have bruises in the morning, but when he tipped his head back and let out a cry as his body owned her, spilling his seed into her, she nearly wept with the perfection of it.

As powerful and aggressive as Avery had been while claiming her, as soon as he spent himself and collapsed to her side, he turned into a pussycat.

"That was wonderful," he hummed, drawing her back against his chest and cradling her as though she were the most special thing he'd ever had his arms around. "You are so beautiful, so perfect. I don't ever want to let you go."

Maeve's breath caught in her lungs. She glanced over her shoulder as best she could while nestled in Avery's embrace. "Do you mean that

seriously?" she asked. "Or is it simply the platitude you tell all of your conquests after you have thoroughly debauched them?"

Avery opened his eyes, grinned, then leaned down to kiss her shoulder. "I think we both know at this point that I meant it seriously," he said, stroking her side as he held her. "I know that I have been a notorious rake in the past, but in this moment, I am the furthest thing from that."

Maeve's heart raced. "So you will not abandon me to my fate as a fallen woman after this?" She paused, then added in a surprisingly vulnerable voice, "You will not think less of me for enjoying my ruination so much?"

Avery laughed deep in his throat, the sound lazy and seductive. He pulled her closer against him, even though they were both overheated and sweaty. "My darling," he said. "I must confess, sadly, that I never have the brain power to stay awake after sex, let alone to have serious discussions. But I can assure you of this—when I say I will never let you go, I mean it. If you'll have me, I will speak to your parents tomorrow."

Maeve wanted to weep with happiness. It was the most inappropriate proposal she could have imagined, but also the very best. "I suppose I should take exception to being used like a London courtesan," she said, snuggling against him and closing her eyes, "but I will confess that I enjoyed your dominance far, far more than I expected to."

"Good," Avery said in a half-asleep voice. "And once we've mastered that, I'll show you a few ways to put me in my place as well."

Maeve thrilled at the idea. She had never imagined that sexual congress could be so much fun or so imaginative. She fell asleep quickly and found herself dreaming of all the ways she and Avery could learn how to keep each other entertained in the bedroom.

The sound of the rain lasted long into the night. At some point, she and Avery woke long enough to feel the chill in the air and to move between the bedsheets instead of lying on top. Maeve slept soundly for several more hours, and when she awoke, the sun was out, birds were chirping somewhere...and someone was in the process of opening the cottage's front door and walking through the main room in heavy boots.

"What the devil?" a gruff, male voice said.

Maeve sucked in a breath. She felt Avery tense behind her and lift to one arm just as a grey-haired man in traveling clothes, carrying a small suitcase, stepped into the bedroom doorway and saw them.

All three of them shouted in various degrees of alarm. Maeve screamed and hugged herself, very conscious of her nakedness. The

old man shouted in pure shock. Avery growled with a combination of surprise and protectiveness.

"My lord!" the old man yelped, dropping his suitcase and immediately turning away.

"Murphy," Avery said in reply, scrambling out of the bed. "I did not know this was your cottage. We were trapped here by the storm last night."

"I...oh...er...my lord..." Mr. Murphy stepped back into the main room seemingly more embarrassed than Avery or Maeve. "I'll just let you tidy up then?" he said, striding away from the door.

Avery crossed the room to close the door, then turned back to Maeve. "We should probably make as speedy a retreat as possible," he said, humor and embarrassment painting his face pink.

"I should say so," Maeve said, bursting into laughter. She jumped out of bed and went to work gathering and donning her discarded clothes. "Who is that man?"

"Thomas Murphy," Avery explained as he, too, dressed in haste. "He's one of my tenant farmers, though he has retired from labor. This retirement cottage is on my estate."

"Oh." It was all Maeve could say. Embarrassment helped her to rush through getting dressed and tidying herself up as much as she could, but surprisingly it wasn't the same as shame. She didn't have a single regret about what she and Avery had done.

Once they were both dressed, before opening the door and facing whatever was to come, Maeve stepped into Avery, resting her hands on his chest and gazing up at him.

"I don't regret anything," she said, then winked.

"Neither do I," Avery said with a fond grin, then leaned in to kiss her. Maeve wanted to melt against him and be a part of him forever. But he pulled back and said the only words that could have disturbed her blissful mood. "Let's get you home to your parents and explain ourselves."

Chapter 6

It dawned on Avery as he and Maeve wheeled their borrowed bicycles across green fields sparkling like diamonds with raindrops from the night's storm that he should feel guilty for debauching a good, respectable woman like Maeve. He should feel terrible for the way he'd seduced her with thoughts of pleasure alone, and how he hadn't paused to consider the consequences. And while he was contemplating feeling guilty about things, he should have scolded himself for behaving like a cad with her, for taking what he wanted from her so aggressively, and for even hinting that he'd like her to pleasure him like a mistress would in the future.

But as they grinned and giggled at each other while walking the last mile back to Maeve's house, his heart was filled with nothing but happiness and light. Not to mention the deep certainty that offering for Maeve and marrying her as soon as possible would ensure the sort of future happiness that he never thought he would be privy to.

In short, Maeve had proven herself to be clever in the way she conversed with him, she'd proven herself to be bold and brave in the way she brought his wool and presented it to him in front of his kinsmen, and she'd proven herself to be exactly the sort of willing siren he adored when she'd sighed and moaned and come hard with him thrusting mercilessly within her. Maeve Sperrin was the perfect woman for him.

And as they pushed their bicycles to a stop in front of the Sperrins' house, she looked as though she was on the verge of entering a labyrinth to face a minotaur.

"I will speak on your behalf, if you'd like," he said, drawing her into a reassuring embrace once they'd leaned the bicycles against the railing of the front porch. "If your father and mother are inclined to censure you in any way, I will speak up for you."

The way she glanced up at him with love and gratitude in her eyes made Avery feel ten feet tall and as strong as an ox.

"You truly are a wonderful man, Avery," she said, lifting briefly to her toes to kiss his lips. "Who ever would have thought it?" she added with a cheeky grin, stepping out of his arms and turning away from

him to mount the stairs to the front door.

Avery laughed, and he was struck by the mad feeling that he was a puppy being led by a leash. He was supposed to feel the opposite, was he not? As though Maeve were completely under his sway, not that he was hers to do with as she pleased.

He shook his head as he came to stand by her as she knocked on the front door. Love wasn't what he'd always assumed it was, but he had a feeling it would turn out to be much better.

He was surprised when Maeve's mother answered the door instead of a maid or butler. The woman's face was creased with anxiety, and the moment she saw her daughter standing there, she burst into a cry of relief.

"Maeve, darling," she exclaimed, then reached for Maeve, drawing her into her arms. "We've been beside ourselves with worry for you."

"We were caught in the storm," Maeve said with a laugh, hugging her mother in return. "But we were safe and well the entire time."

Mrs. Sperrin stiffened at Maeve's words, then, much to Avery's dread, she sniffed slightly. From there, she leaned back and held Maeve at arm's length. She glanced from her daughter to Avery, then back again, with a deeply suspicious look. To top it off, she narrowed her eyes and subtly sniffed again.

"We?" she asked at last, letting go of Maeve and stepping back into the house.

Avery guessed at once what Mrs. Sperrin had detected. In their haste to leave Mr. Murphy's house that morning, they hadn't bathed. A middle-aged woman who had had several children of her own would be wise enough to detect scents on her daughter that shouldn't have been there. And all of that was without taking into consideration the scandal of a single man and woman spending a night together alone, whether anything had happened or not.

"I fell from my bicycle on the ride yesterday," Maeve explained as they walked into the parlor nearest the front door. "Alice was with us at first, but when the storm started, she rode back to fetch a wagon." Maeve suddenly frowned and glanced to Avery. "I suppose she never returned with that wagon because of the storm."

Avery nodded. That was the most likely explanation. If he hadn't been so certain Miss Woodmont had her sights set on him, he might have believed that she had deliberately left her friend alone with a man overnight to speed along the process of marriage.

"We haven't heard from Alice either," Mrs. Woodmont said, gesturing stiffly for Avery to have a seat in one of the parlor's chairs. "Marcy, would you fetch tea for our guest?" she asked the young maid who had appeared in the parlor doorway.

"Yes, Mrs. Sperrin." The maid curtsied and went on her way.

“We sent Jenkins to the Woodmonts’ to inquire after Alice, but we haven’t heard back from him yet,” Mrs. Sperrin said.

Avery nodded. That explained why Mrs. Sperrin had answered the door herself.

“I am terribly sorry for any inconvenience our misfortunes might have caused you, madam,” he said in his most respectful voice possible. He had a feeling Mrs. Sperrin didn’t think particularly highly of him at the moment.

Before he could go on, Mr. Sperrin appeared in the doorway with a booming, “Is that Maeve, home at last?”

“Home safe and sound, Papa,” Maeve said, jumping up from the sofa, where she’d just had a seat, and crossing to embrace her father.

Avery winced slightly at her affectionate gesture. If Mrs. Sperrin had detected what he suspected she had, then Mr. Sperrin would certainly scent their indiscretion as well.

Indeed, as soon as Maeve stepped back from him, Mr. Sperrin sniffed, then frowned.

Avery drew in a breath, knowing he’d need to take action right away. He hadn’t precisely planned to ask for Maeve’s hand so bluntly, but necessity dictated speed.

“I am well aware of the less than savory appearance of your Maeve and I being secluded together overnight in a small cottage,” he began, hoping that his use of Maeve’s given name would alert her parents to where he was headed next.

“I trust nothing untoward happened?” Mr. Sperrin asked, glaring at Avery as though he already knew the answer.

Avery felt rather like a biological specimen pinned to a display board. He couldn’t quite bring himself to lie, but he was loath to reveal the entire truth.

“I think we are all aware of the appearance of the situation,” he said frankly, nodding to Mr. Sperrin with as much deference as an earl could show a man whose social standing was lower than his. “And I can assure you, I wish to make things right.”

Maeve suddenly drew in a breath and touched a hand to her mouth. “Oh, Papa, you don’t think....” She left her sentence unfinished, as though she wasn’t quite certain she could lie either.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you fly off with an O’Shea without accompanying you myself,” Mrs. Sperrin hissed, sinking deeper into the sofa where she sat. “Now you’re ruined beyond repair.”

Avery’s brow went up. That was a bit dramatic of the woman. Particularly since he was standing right there, willing to make things right.

Mr. Sperrin looked as though he were on the verge of calling the constable as well.

"I think you misunderstand my intentions," Avery said, inching closer to Maeve. He glanced to her, hoping she saw his unspoken request that she show solidarity with what he planned to say next.

"Forgive me if I question the intentions of a rake," Mr. Sperrin said. "We have seen the ruination that a wily man can cause before."

Avery took in a breath. The Sperrins either knew about Miss Woodmont, or they had knowledge of other sorts of indiscretions. His half-cousin Frank's origins weren't exactly a secret in the county, after all.

"I would like to ask for Maeve's hand in marriage," he said, sounding more combative than joyful about the request, thanks to the treatment he was receiving. "I have come to love her dearly, and after everything Maeve and I spoke of last night, it has become clear to me that I want nothing more than to make her my wife and to spend the rest of my life with her."

If that didn't convince them he was genuine, nothing would.

Indeed, both of Maeve's parents lost their angry looks. They exchanged glances with each other, stared at Maeve for a moment, then burst into smiles.

"Of course, we accept your offer of marriage," Mr. Sperrin answered on Maeve's behalf.

Avery thought that was a bit presumptuous of him and extraordinarily hypocritical, given the man's suspicions of moments ago, but as he already knew Maeve's thoughts on the matter, he was willing to ignore the way the man slighted his own daughter.

"My little Maeve, a countess," Mrs. Sperrin said, pressing her hands to her heart as she sat forward on the sofa.

"I love your daughter," Avery said, reaching for Maeve's hand and raising it to his lips. He was tempted to wink at her, but decided that would create problems neither he nor Maeve needed. "Nothing would make me happier than to love her forever."

Maeve smiled at him as though he'd unhooked the moon from the sky and given it to her as a bauble to wear in her hair. "And I accept wholeheartedly," she said.

"A Christmas wedding," Mrs. Sperrin said, leaping up from the sofa and crossing to them. "We must have a Christmas wedding. We could decorate the church with holly and berries and red ribbons—"

"I am afraid that we won't be able to wait that long," Avery cut her off.

"Oh?" Mr. Sperrin asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion all over again. "And why is there need for so much haste?" He glanced to Maeve as though he expected her to announce the impending arrival of a grandchild.

Avery was quickly losing patience with the Sperrins. "Haste is

necessary because I am expected in London for the opening of Parliament in a month's time," he said. "I would rather marry Maeve in three weeks, as soon as the banns can be properly read, and take her with me instead of extending the engagement or being forced to travel back and forth, as I assume you would like her to be married from her own house."

"Oh," Mr. Sperrin said, looking sheepish. "Yes, I believe that would be agreeable."

"No, it would not."

The sudden comment came from the doorway, where Miss Woodmont stood, along with a man Avery assumed was the Sperrins' butler. Miss Woodmont had evidently been standing where she was long enough to hear the engagement announcement.

Maeve's eyes went wide in surprise, then her face pinched with regret. "Alice, I can explain."

"Can you?" Alice said, blinking rapidly, as though she might cry.

Avery was as out of his depth as it was possible to be. He wasn't entirely insensible to the hopes Miss Woodmont had had, but surely the woman must have known he couldn't marry her. Even so, how did she not feel joy for her friend making a good match? He was woefully out of step with the way women's minds worked.

Maeve crossed the room, as if she would embrace her friend, but Miss Woodmont backed into the hallway.

"There is no explanation," Miss Woodmont said. She lowered her voice to a whisper as she went on with, "You know my feelings on this matter. You know my...my predicament and all potential solutions to it."

Maeve peeked woefully over her shoulder to Avery, then focused her regret on her friend. "We should talk about this," she said in a quiet voice. "Somewhere private."

"I cannot believe you would betray me this way," Miss Woodmont said in return, though she let Maeve escort her out through the front door and onto the porch. "You know I wanted him."

Avery turned to smile awkwardly at Maeve's parents. None of them knew what to do other than to stand there like poles.

"I'm certain tea will be here shortly," Mrs. Sperrin said with a sheepish laugh. "I cannot imagine what is keeping Marcy."

She headed for the hall, fleeing the uncomfortable situation.

That left Avery alone with Mr. Sperrin.

"I trust everything is as it should be in this matter," Mr. Sperrin said.

Avery wasn't certain he knew what the man was talking about. He had the horrible idea that Mr. Sperrin was asking if he'd bedded Maeve.

"I can assure you, sir, everything is exactly as it should be," he insisted.

Mr. Sperrin hummed as though he didn't quite believe him, then said, "Let me just fetch my diary to see if we can schedule the events that are necessary for a wedding within the next three weeks."

He, too, exited the room. Avery was left standing by himself in silence.

Except that through the silence, he could hear the argument Maeve and Miss Woodmont were having on the porch. He questioned whether he should be listening in, then moved closer to the window so he could hear the whole thing more clearly.

"...knew Lord Carnlough was my last chance," Miss Woodmont was insisting. "Now you've gone and stolen him from me. What am I supposed to do now?"

"But Alice," Maeve insisted, "I love him. Truly, I do. You've no idea how much. I have stolen nothing from you, because Avery wasn't yours to begin with."

"I cannot believe you would say that," Miss Woodmont snapped at her in return. "You know how dangerous my life is. You know that I stand at the edge of the abyss. You were the only one I thought I could rely on for help, and now you've gone and done this?"

"But Alice," Maeve insisted in a tearful voice, "you do not love Avery. Not as I do. You only want him as a way to save yourself from the past. There are so many other ways you could do that."

"There are not and you know it," Miss Woodmont shouted. "I am ruined, completely ruined, and you've just gone and made it worse."

"Alice, you know that I love you. You are like a sister to me," Maeve pleaded with her. "Can you not simply be happy for me? I am engaged to a man I love, a man who is higher above me than I ever could have dreamed. And we can find a way to help you as well. I'm certain Avery has every sort of connection to—"

"No," Miss Woodmont cut her off. "This is a betrayal that I cannot countenance. My life is ruined, and it is entirely your fault."

"I swear, Alice, I never wanted to hurt you," Maeve said, clearly weeping. "This can all be resolved, I swear it. We can both be happy."

"You know that isn't true." Miss Woodmont sounded as though she were weeping now too. "You know there are no further chances for a woman like me. And yet, you refuse to help me."

Avery heard sharp footsteps, followed by Maeve calling out, "Alice!"

"You have no idea how deeply you have cut through my heart, Maeve," Miss Woodmont called out, her voice clearly distressed. "I thought you were a friend, but you are just another snake who doesn't care what becomes of me."

“That’s not true,” Maeve wept.

“I never want to speak to you again,” Miss Woodmont shouted. “I never want to so much as look at you. I trusted you, and you’ve betrayed me. I am done with you now.”

More footsteps were heard, traveling down the stairs, before Maeve called out, “Alice!”

Avery pushed himself into motion. He had no understanding of women and their friendships whatsoever. To him, Miss Woodmont was behaving irrationally in the face of something from Maeve that did not deserve the sort of censure she was getting. He didn’t have the first idea of how to correct the situation, though. All he knew was that the woman he loved needed him, and come hell or high water, he would be there for her.

Maeve felt as though her heart had been torn out and pulled

away from her as Alice stormed down the steps and on to her buggy, one hand clapped over her mouth. Her dear friend was obviously weeping, which only made Maeve weep as well.

“Alice!” she called after her again, praying with everything she had that things would change and that Alice would suddenly be happy for her instead of seeing Maeve’s engagement as a betrayal. “Alice,” she repeated, clasping a hand over her bleeding heart, her voice turning weak.

She sagged against the wall of the house and let her tears flow freely as Alice snapped the reins over her horse’s back and drove the buggy out to the road. She sped away from Maeve with such ferocity that Maeve feared for her safety, but there was nothing at all she could do about it.

She twisted to rest her forehead against the side of the house and let out a sob that came from the depths of her soul. Alice was closer to her than her own sisters. They’d endured so much together. Maeve had stood faithfully by Alice’s side through the entire trial with Ryan, sacrificing more than a few opportunities for marriage or social advancement along the way. It would have been easy for her to be angry with Alice, but she couldn’t be. She knew how desperately Alice was hurting, and just when Maeve could have been a good friend to her, she’d pushed her away.

“Maeve, darling?” Avery’s soft voice murmured at Maeve’s side.

Maeve gasped and straightened, quickly wiping away her tears with her shaking hands. She tried her best to smile at Avery. She should have been overjoyed for that moment. Avery had called her darling, and the compassion in his eyes as he watched her was far more than some women’s husbands ever showed them when they were distressed.

“I wish I could explain to her that everything will work out for the best in the end,” she said, sniffing wetly and brushing her face again, hoping it would help.

Avery took a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his jacket—

and of course he would have a handkerchief on hand exactly when Maeve needed it, that was simply the kind of gentleman he was—and offered it to her. Maeve took it gratefully, wiped her eyes, and after a preemptively apologetic glance up at Avery, she blew her nose.

“You and Miss Woodmont have been the closest of friends for quite some time, as I understand it,” Avery said, discreetly pretending Maeve hadn’t just made a thoroughly undignified sound.

She nodded, finished cleaning her nose, then palmed the wet handkerchief rather than returning it. Avery was to be her husband, and soon. There would be time to return what was his later, after it was laundered.

“Since we were girls,” Maeve said, her voice still sounding weak and pinched. “Alice was often unhappy, as her parents have always been quite strict. All she has ever wanted is someone to love her. I believe that is what led her into disaster with Michael Feeney.”

“And what has caused her to believe I might be a suitable groom?” Avery suggested.

Maeve nodded, sending him a guilty look as she did. “I know that you never could have considered her,” she said, feeling as though she were uttering words of betrayal as she did. “And I think perhaps Alice knows that deep down inside as well. But she is so hurt by other things, by life and fate, that she cannot see that.”

“She should not spurn the one person who has helped her through everything,” Avery said with a confused frown, as though he couldn’t quite figure out why someone would do such a thing to begin with.

Maeve laughed with bitter irony. “I believe so as well, but there is no arguing with Alice when emotions are high. And now—” She gulped as her own emotions crushed down on her. Her entire face pinched as she tried and failed to fight off more tears. “Now I fear as though I have lost her friendship forever simply by pursuing my own happiness.”

A sob wracked her body, and there was nothing she could do to stop herself from breaking down entirely. Her only consolation was that Avery let out a sympathetic breath and drew her into his arms.

Of course, that only made Maeve wail louder. He was so wonderful, so thoughtful. He was strong and manly when he needed to be and a soft place for her to land when it was necessary. He was so far above her, and he shouldn’t have stooped to consider her in the first place, but now he was hers and she was his. She struggled to feel as though she deserved that.

After crying herself out for a bit, she glanced up at him. “Do you think,” she began, swallowed, then went on. “Do you think perhaps we could postpone the wedding after all? So that I might reason with Alice and convince her all will be well?”

Avery winced as he stroked a hand over her head. "My darling, I would, but as I said earlier, I need to be in London in a month, and I do not foresee myself returning to Ireland until the spring. All things considered, with our indiscretion last night, I don't think we can risk waiting until the spring."

Maeve nodded and rested her cheek against his shoulder. "You are right, of course." And if she were honest, she was damned lucky that Avery had such a ready excuse as to why they needed to make haste to wed, just in case.

"All will be well, my dear," Avery said, kissing her head, then stepping back when footsteps sounded in the hall, indicating that one of Maeve's parents was about to interrupt them. "You will see. Miss Woodmont cares deeply for you, and I am certain she will see reason soon."

"Thank you," Maeve said, glancing up at him through her wet lashes. "I hope you are right."

The trouble was that she knew how stubborn Alice could be. She was stubborn enough that she'd managed to convince her deeply conservative parents to let her keep Ryan near her instead of giving him up at birth. She was stubborn enough to think she could woo and win an earl who knew her story. Maeve was desperately afraid that would also mean she was stubborn enough to break off a lifelong friendship over a man.

NOTHING HAD EVER MADE Avery feel quite as helpless as watching Maeve's friendship with Miss Woodmont fall to pieces before his eyes. He was at a complete loss as to what to do about it. He'd escorted Maeve back into the house, then waited while she'd gone upstairs to bathe and change, talking with her parents the whole time. Mr. and Mrs. Sperrin had changed their attitudes toward him in a moment when they realized he fully intended to make their daughter a countess, whether he'd ruined her or not.

When Maeve joined them once more—clean and nicely dressed, but clearly depressed in spirit—Mr. and Mrs. Sperrin had failed to show deference to her feelings. They'd disparaged Miss Woodmont for turning her back on a friend who was about to be so highly placed and hinted that they weren't entirely pleased with Miss Woodmont's reputation. Avery didn't think they actually knew about her child, but they didn't seem to care much for Miss Woodmont all the same.

"Which was terribly gauche of them, if you ask me," he told his sister, Angeline, hours later, when he was home, cleaned up himself, and taking afternoon tea with Angeline and Rafe, as well as Rory and Siobhan Feeney. "They could see that their daughter was deeply distressed at the loss of the friendship, and all they wanted to do was

talk about how quickly they could put together the grandest wedding Ballymena has ever seen.

"I thought our wedding was the grandest Ballymena has ever seen," Rory said, winking at Siobhan.

Instead of following along with his teasing, Siobhan rolled her eyes at her husband. "Now is not the time for joking, my love," she said, patting his knee as though he were a disobedient child. From what Avery had observed of the newlyweds, they quite frequently treated each other as though they were disobedient children. He didn't want to think about how that likely extended into their bedchamber.

He cleared his throat, adjusted the way he sat in his chair near the fireplace, and took a sip of tea before going on. "It was disgraceful, and the Sperrins' behavior made me deeply happy to have asked for Maeve's hand. I cannot wait to remove her from that difficult household and to help her establish one of her own."

"I am very proud of you, brother," Angeline said, treating him to one of her angelic smiles as she smoothed a hand over her round belly. "And so happy that you have finally decided to settle and perhaps begin a family of your own?" She lifted her brow and blushed. "Little Bernard and this one would be so happy to have cousins to grow up with."

"One thing at a time, my dear," Avery said, his face heating. For all he knew, he might have granted his sister's wish the night before. He hoped there would be more time for him and Maeve to enjoy each other intimately before the inevitable children, though.

"It seems to me that, before your lovely bride can find happiness in marriage and family, she needs to reconcile with her bosom friend," Siobhan said with a wise look. "Maeve Sperrin and Alice Woodmont have been known to be the closest of friends for ages."

"Precisely," Avery said. "Which is why I found her parents' complete deafness to the misery Maeve was feeling to be abhorrent. And it is also why I feel I must do something to make things right, as it could be argued I am the reason they went wrong."

That caused the others to sit up.

"How are you the cause of a tiff between two female friends?" Rafe asked with a look of genuine confusion.

Angeline and Siobhan glanced to him as though he were an extreme dolt.

"I have reason to believe Miss Woodmont had set her heart on becoming my bride, and that she was deeply disappointed when I offered for Maeve instead," he said. He would have said more, and one quick glance at Rory and Siobhan told him that they understood. He would not divulge Miss Woodmont's secret to Angeline and Rafe, though, even if Angeline was his dearest sister.

“That isn’t any reason to call off a friendship,” Rafe said, even more puzzled without the full information behind the break.

“Whatever the case,” Avery rushed on so that they would be out of danger of secrets coming out, “I feel as though it is my responsibility to repair the friendship and put everything to right. Preferably before the wedding.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” Siobhan asked, one eyebrow raised doubtfully.

“I am open to suggestions,” Avery said, sending a pleading look around to the others.

“It seems quite simple, if you ask me,” Rafe said with a shrug. “You merely need to sit the two women down and explain to them that they are behaving foolishly and that there is no point in destroying a friendship over something so silly.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Siobhan and Angeline hummed and snorted, rolled their eyes and made sounds of derision.

“What is so wrong with that?” Rory asked, as if offended by their reaction. “Obviously, what is needed in this situation is a bit of cool rationality, since very little has been displayed thus far.”

That caused Siobhan and Angeline to snort and shake their heads even more.

“I suppose the facts of the situation should be laid out to them,” Avery said, rubbing his chin. He suspected that the reason his sister and cousin Siobhan were reacting with such dismissiveness was because they thought they knew better. But Rory and Rafe had the right idea, as far as he was concerned. “They are behaving irrationally. They should be told as much.”

“How is Miss Sperrin behaving irrationally in this matter?” Angeline asked indignantly.

“And you propose to repair a friendship through lecture?” Siobhan brushed on, equally taken aback.

“Well, through instruction, perhaps,” Avery said. “The ladies in question are not weighing the pros and cons adequately. They are squandering the capital that they have built up with each other over the years. It simply isn’t logical for them to break now.”

Angeline and Siobhan laughed at him.

“Dear Avery,” Angeline said, leaning over her round stomach to pat his hand as it rested on the arm of his chair, “you understand nothing about women.”

Avery huffed a laugh. “I believe that much is obvious.”

“What would you suggest, my love?” Rafe asked, gazing at his wife as though she were a fount of wisdom.

“You must give the two ladies time,” Angeline said, resting back on the sofa and snuggling against Rafe’s side, in spite of the fact that they

were in mixed company, not all of which was family. "They will begin to miss each other and yearn for their friendship, and then all will be dealt with and forgiven."

"Yes, dear, but time is the one thing we do not have in this situation," Avery argued. "I need to depart for London in a month, and Maeve has agreed to have the wedding as soon as the banns can be read."

"So you need a speedy solution to this problem," Rory said, knitting his brow together in thought. "The ladies need to be forced to see that their behavior is not useful, and that they need to reverse course at once."

"Spoken like a true captain of industry," Siobhan said in a wry voice, exchanging a grin with Angeline.

A stroke of inspiration hit Avery, and he sat up straighter. "I think you are right," he said, tapping his chin as ideas flew to him.

"Don't listen to him, Avery," Siobhan said. "My darling husband is most certainly *not* right."

"But I think he is, to a degree," Avery said. He glanced at the others, then spoke aloud the plan that was forming in his mind. "Maeve and Miss Woodmont need to be forced to come to terms with each other as quickly as possible. And the best way to do that is to put them in a situation where they cannot help but talk things through."

"I'm not certain I like this," Angeline said.

"No, I think your brother is on to something," Rafe said, sitting a bit straighter. "I think you should find a way to seclude the two women in a room together and not let them out until they've sorted things."

"No!" Siobhan protested.

"I think you're exactly right," Avery said, scooting to the end of his chair. "Think of it," he went on. "It all makes perfect sense. Sometime in the next three weeks, before the wedding, I need to trap Maeve and Miss Woodmont in a room together."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Rory asked, his expression thoughtful.

"I could invent some sort of excuse to bring them together," Avery said. "At a neutral location, of course. Somewhere that they cannot escape. I will lock them in the room and inform them that they are not to come out again until they are friends once more."

"You'd better provide them with tea and cakes while they're in there," Siobhan said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, "because with your plan, they might be there for quite some time."

"Tea and cakes are a must," Rory agreed with a serious nod.

"Absolutely," Avery said. "And perhaps comfortable furnishings as well."

“No, no,” Rafe said, shaking his head. “You’re going about it all wrong.”

“Finally, a voice of reason,” Siobhan said, gesturing toward Rafe.

Rafe went on with, “You need to lock them in a bare room without any refreshments at all. That way, they will be properly motivated to air their differences and resolve them as swiftly as possible.”

Siobhan made a disgusted sound and covered her face with one hand.

Avery raised his eyebrows at her momentarily, then turned to Rafe. “You may be right. If they feel a bit of urgency to leave the room where they are trapped, they will be more likely to resolve things in a timely manner.”

“Then whatever you do, do not put a chamber pot in said room,” Rory said with a grin.

“Ugh, men!” Siobhan threw up her hands and collapsed back into her chair. “The lot of you are useless.”

“But even you must admit that Miss Woodmont and Miss Sperrin need to talk to make things better,” Rory told her.

“I would simply be providing an arena for that to happen,” Avery said. “I would monitor them the entire time from somewhere else in whatever house I use to carry out this plan.”

“It will backfire on you,” Siobhan said.

“At least give them a bit of time to perhaps work things out on their own,” Angeline said carefully. “You may not need to intervene at all.”

“I cannot wait forever,” Avery said, shaking his head. “The wedding will go forward in three weeks, and then my dear Maeve and her friend will be separated by England and the Irish Sea while Parliament is in session.”

“There is still time,” Angeline insisted.

“Yes, dear, of course there is,” Avery told his sister with an indulgent smile.

A large part of him suspected she and Siobhan were right. They knew more about the female disposition than he did. At the same time, he felt the urgency of the situation keenly and knew something needed to be done. It was better, in his opinion, to force the issue as soon as possible than to let it sit around and fester once Maeve and Miss Woodmont were inevitably separated by more than just an argument.

Beyond that, Avery was filled with the conviction that the very best wedding gift he could give to his bride was to restore her full happiness and that of her friend. And who knew? Perhaps once he was able to reconcile the two women, he could find a suitable groom for Miss Woodmont. That way, everyone could be happy.

*P*lanning one's wedding was supposed to be a joyous occasion.

Maeve had looked forward to it from the time she was a girl. But even though she stood on the verge of marrying a wonderful man who she was certain would make her blissfully happy, she grew more and more melancholy about the whole thing as preparations were made.

"Dear, do stop fussing and show a little interest," her mother scolded her as the seamstress fitting her wedding gown finished pinning the hem. "This is your wedding gown. We have an appointment with Lord Carnlough's cook tomorrow to discuss the menu for the reception, and then Lady Coyle herself has invited us to tea. You should be brimming with happiness, not looking as though you are on your way to the gallows."

"Yes, Mama," Maeve sighed. She tried to force a smile for the seamstress. Her wedding gown was beautiful, after all. The design employed more lace than she ever would have been able to afford, had she not been marrying an earl. It was a sign that her life was about to become one of privilege and excellence.

And none of it was worth a thing without Alice's approval.

She hadn't heard a word from Alice in over ten days. Preparations for the wedding had begun immediately after the engagement, immediately after her horrible fight with Alice, and hadn't stopped for a moment since. Maeve had tried sending letters to Alice, begging her to come for tea, and even sending Siobhan Feeney to plead her case, but Alice was firm in her silence. Maeve had the terrible feeling Alice would never speak to her again.

Knowing that made everything else pale, even though it was supposed to be the happiest time of her life.

"Well, come along, then," her mother sighed, nodding to the seamstress as she finished her pinning. "Take that off and we'll return home. Tea and a nap are precisely what you need."

"Yes, Mama."

Maeve let the seamstress help her out of her unfinished wedding gown and into her afternoon dress. She should have been sighing over lace and oohing over pearls, but all Maeve could do as she laced and

tightened her boots, then pinned her hat to her head before leaving the shop was sag and wish things were different.

Before she could leave the shop, though, a young lad tumbled into the store, holding out a folded piece of paper.

"Are you Miss Sperrin?" he asked, glancing from Maeve to her mother to the seamstress and settling on Maeve again.

"I am," she said, curious about what the lad wanted.

"I was told to give this to you," he said, handing over the paper. "He said it's a matter of some urgency."

"Oh?" Maeve opened the missive and read it. "Oh!" She sucked in a breath and placed a hand on her heart. "Lord Carnlough needs me at once. He says there's a problem with the church and that I am needed to resolve things."

"We must go at once, then," her mother said with a sharp nod.

Maeve took another look at the letter. "He says I should come alone." She glanced to her mother. "The church is only one street down, Mama. Why do you not take the things we've purchased home, and I will have Lord Carnlough deliver me there as soon as this church matter is resolved."

"Indeed," her mother said, narrowing her eyes and tilting her chin up as though Avery had invited her to a seduction.

Maeve made an impatient sound. "Oh, Mama, really," she said, crossing to the doorway and grabbing her purse along the way. "He's asked to meet me at the church. The vicar and his assistant and who knows who else will be there to chaperone."

"I suppose," her mother said hesitantly as Maeve walked out the door.

Maeve rolled her eyes impatiently as she strode down the street. Regardless of the sadness surrounding her wedding, she would be glad to be a married woman and no longer under the sway of her mother. The sooner that happened the better. She was far too old to be treated the way she was to begin with.

"Avery? Hello?" she called out when she reached the church. The building seemed a bit more deserted than it should in the middle of the day.

"I'm down here," Avery's voice answered her from the end of the hall that ran perpendicular to the chapel. "In this room. Please come join me here."

Maeve started down the hall with a frown. The door at the end of the hall was open, and she saw a hint of movement from inside when she was a few feet away. But instead of Avery, Alice stepped into the doorway.

"What do you mean by that, Lord Carn—" Alice's question was cut short when she saw Maeve.

A second later, Avery appeared in a second doorway that Maeve had just passed. He rushed toward her so aggressively that Maeve leapt forward on instinct, continuing into the room where Alice stood. Alice backed deeper into the room, and as soon as Avery had shepherded Maeve into the room with her, he slammed the door shut.

The sound of the lock clicking followed.

"What in heaven's name?" Maeve began, twisting back to the door and knocking on it. "Avery, what is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"I've trapped the two of you together deliberately," Avery called through the closed door. "It is well past time for the two of you to settle your differences and move on as friends."

"Avery!" Maeve shouted, pounding on the door. "This isn't at all amusing. Let us out this instant."

"I did not come here at your invitation to be held prisoner," Alice said, striding forward so that she, too, could bang on the door. "This is highly unfair."

"Bitterly unfair," Maeve agreed, joining Alice in thumping the door, out of frustration, if nothing else. "You cannot do this."

"But I have done it, my dear," Avery said, far too much glee in his voice. "And, at last, the two of you will make up as you should. It was never my intention to break up a friendship, but I feel it is my duty to restore it."

"I have never heard anything so ridiculous in my life," Maeve said, pounding the door a few more times for good measure.

"This is highly irregular," Alice said, stepping back.

"I will not let the two of you out of this room until you are best of friends again," Avery called to them. "I do not care how long it takes. But you should know that there are no refreshments in the room and no chamber pot, so you may want to resolve things sooner rather than later."

A part of Maeve wanted to laugh. Avery seemed devilishly pleased with himself. As much as she hated to admit it, she loved him more for his meddling.

All the same, she called through the door, "You will pay for this, Avery O'Shea. Mark my words."

Avery lowered his voice to a timbre Maeve suspected only she was meant to hear and said, "I certainly hope so."

That comment left Maeve flushed and her heart thumping.

A moment later, and those emotions ran cold as Avery's footsteps were heard retreating down the hall. The blackguard had truly trapped her and Alice alone, and he wouldn't see reason and let them go.

That meant the only thing Maeve could do was pivot to face her

friend.

Alice had marched to the other end of the decidedly bare room, hugging herself with a look of fury and hurt and uncertainty. She peeked at Maeve once she reached the other end of the room, then immediately snapped her head away and up when she saw that Maeve was looking at her.

"This is utterly ridiculous," Maeve said, throwing her arms out to her sides. "I did not ask him to do this or put him up to this in any way."

Alice merely *humphed* in response.

Maeve sighed and pressed her fingertips to her forehead, where she felt a headache coming on. The room was sparsely furnished. It held only two wooden chairs that faced each other in the center of the room. That little detail was enough to make Maeve laugh humorlessly as she crossed to sit in one of the chairs, setting her purse on the floor.

"Perhaps after this you won't be so jealous of me marrying that lout," she told Alice.

Alice whipped to face her from where she'd been staring out one of the windows. "I am not jealous of you."

"Aren't you?" Maeve said with far more sass than she should have. Her patience with Alice was as thin as silk, now that the two of them were alone after nearly two weeks of silence. "You have certainly been behaving as though you are."

"It is not jealousy," Alice insisted, marching across the room to the other chair but not sitting in it. "It is the bitterness of betrayal and the frustration of defeat."

"How have I betrayed you?" Maeve demanded. "How have I defeated you? You seem determined to blame me for all the wrongs in your life when I have not been the one who made the decisions that led to them."

"Are you saying that I am to blame, then?" Alice squeaked, jerking straight.

"You are only to blame for falling in love and wishing to fall in love again," Maeve said with an exhausted sigh, pressing her fingertips to her forehead again. "Michael Feeney was to blame for ruining you, and I suppose it could be said that Avery was to blame for not choosing you to be his bride."

"He was my last chance, Maeve," Alice lamented, sinking into the chair at last. "He was the only man who has shown even a bit of interest in me in two years. Now, not only am I doomed to be a reviled spinster for the rest of my days, he is taking away my best friend as well." She lowered her head and burst into tears.

Maeve's heart caught in her throat. She lowered her hands and gazed miserably at Alice. "I am not leaving you for good," she said,

scooting closer to Alice. "Yes, my duty will be to my husband and our family. Yes, that will take me to London from time to time. But I will never forsake you. I will write whenever possible, and you will always have a place with me and Avery."

Alice shook her head, wiping tears off her pink and shining face, unable to look Maeve in the eye. "You cannot guarantee that. You will be a countess, which means you will have so many new friends, so many other duties to attend to. You will no longer have time for your old, disgraced friend. And Maeve," she glanced up, meeting Maeve's eyes with sudden fear, "I sincerely do not know what will happen to me and Ryan without you."

"Everything will be fine." Maeve reached out and took Alice's hands, squeezing them, even though she wasn't certain it was a promise she was able to make. "You are a good woman, Alice, and a clever and beautiful one at that. You have had a stumble, but I am certain you will rise again."

Alice shook her head and reluctantly pulled her hands from Maeve's. "My father and mother are furious at me for failing to secure Lord Carnlough's hand," she said. "They demanded once again that I send Ryan away and that I find a man to marry. They said they will choose for me if I cannot find a man willing to take me on my own." She pressed a hand to her stomach before going on with, "I have a terrible feeling that they intend for me to marry Mr. Kilpatrick."

Maeve blinked and sucked in a breath. "That old mill owner who frequents the pubs?"

Alice nodded miserably. "They say he has expressed interest in me." Her shoulders drooped and she let out a sob. "I will refuse to marry him, of course, and when I do, they will throw me out. What do you think will become of me, and of Ryan, if I have nowhere to live and no one to turn to?"

Maeve's heart swelled with anger and with love for her friend. She reached out and took Alice's hand again. "I will not let that happen," she said. "I swear to you, Alice, I will stand by you, no matter what happens."

"But how can you if you are away in London?" Alice sniffled. "What can you do if you are a distant countess? Knowing me would be enough to ruin your reputation, and you will have so much at stake as you begin your new life in London society."

"I cannot stand by and watch while your parents cast you aside and leave you to fend for yourself," Maeve said.

"What can you do to stop it?" Alice asked hopelessly.

Maeve's heart shuddered within her. She felt as though she stood on the edge of a precipice, the most important decision of her life in front of her. She had been so blessed to have every good thing she

could imagine come her way, but some things were far more important than having her way and enjoying benefits that Alice would never have.

"We'll set out together," she said, making up her mind then and there. "We won't wait for your parents to throw you out."

"What do you mean?" Alice blinked at her in astonishment.

Maeve drew in a breath and sat straighter, her determination growing. "I mean just as I said. We'll take Ryan and go somewhere new, somewhere we can start over. We'll...we'll make up a story that our husbands were killed in the army. We could run a boarding house or set up a shop of some sort." A pang squeezed her heart as she said, "Perhaps we could set up a wool shop."

Alice must have known what that would cost her. "Lord Carnlough," she said what Maeve was thinking. "How can we do all that when you are married to an earl and a member of the House of Lords?"

"I won't marry him," Maeve said, grief mingling with determination in her gut. "I cannot marry a man and be happy when I know that you are miserable. You are my dearest friend." She slipped off her chair and knelt in front of Alice, clutching Alice's hands to her chest. "I will never be able to be happy if I know that you are unhappy. You are my sister and my bosom companion. I would rather let Avery down so that I can stand by you than marry him while I know you are in dire straits."

"But...but Maeve, you cannot do that." Alice shook her head as she tried to pull her hands away from Maeve's.

Maeve wouldn't let her. "I insist," she said. She stood, bringing Alice with her. "We can do this," she said. "We can create a perfectly wonderful life together. We are both intelligent and daring. Whatever we set our minds to, we can accomplish it."

"You would give up the chance to be a countess for me?" Alice asked, weeping again.

Her effusive gratitude brought Maeve to tears as well. "I will be very sorry indeed not to marry Avery," she confessed. "I love him, and I very much enjoyed the way he bedded me when we were trapped in that cottage by the storm," she added with a wicked grin.

Alice gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth. "Maeve, you didn't! You must marry him now. I would hate for you to end up in the same predicament I am in."

Maeve shook her head. "There is no danger of that. I had my courses a few days ago. There is no baby. We are free to run off and make our own lives."

"But the dangers we would face, the struggles we would have," Alice said.

“We will overcome them together,” Maeve insisted. “Friendships like ours are so much more important than silly things like men and marriage. And besides, I would never truly be happy if I knew you were in distress.”

“Oh, Maeve, you are the most darling friend ever,” Alice sobbed. She threw herself at Maeve and the two of them clung together weeping and keeping each other from falling.

That was how Avery found the two of them several minutes later when he knocked on the door, then unlocked it and poked his head around to see what was happening.

“This is delightful,” he said with a wide smile, stepping fully into the room. “I knew this plot would work. I knew that the two of you would be able to work out your differences if you had the opportunity to talk things through.” He paused, his smile faltering as Maeve and Alice let go of each other to face him, hand in hand. “I trust that is what you were able to do?” he asked, his brow lifting. “I trust that everything is resolved and we can all move on happily?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Maeve said slowly, wiping her tear-streaked face with the back of her hand. She glanced to Alice, who nodded, then faced Avery. “Alice and I have indeed spoken, and we have decided that I cannot let Alice face the cold, cruel world alone.”

“Of course not,” Avery said, his smile returning in full force. “Because you are a good friend, my darling.”

Maeve’s brave smile wavered, and she thought she might weep again. Avery was such a lovely, strong, handsome man, and she truly did believe that they would have grown to love each other more and more with each passing day. It was a bitter thing that she could not ensure her own happiness and Alice’s too.

“I’m so pleased that you think so, my lord,” she said, addressing him formally on purpose. “Because Alice and I have decided that it is imperative for the two of us to stand together. And because of that, I am so terribly sorry, but I cannot marry you.”

Avery had assumed everything was proceeding exactly as it should. There had been no screaming and shouting, no sounds of chairs being thrown about the room, and no breaking glass from objects or persons going through the windows. All of those things had come as the very best of signs to him. And when the low murmur of the two ladies' voices had settled to the soft drone of conversation, he had been certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that his plan to force Maeve and Miss Woodmont to reconcile was a masterful one.

Which was why Maeve's declaration that she could not marry him struck him as though someone had thrown a brick at his head.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked, blinking rapidly. Surely, he'd heard her wrong. After everything the two of them had been through, after the joy they'd experienced in the cottage during the storm, she couldn't possibly be saying that she would refuse his hand in marriage. It was inconceivable.

Maeve's countenance changed from stalwart indifference to deep emotion, and she rushed to Avery, grasping his arm. "It's not that I have no wish to marry you, Avery," she said, blinking back tears. "I do. Dearly. But I could never be truly happy in a situation where I have chosen my own joy and comfort over that of my dearest friend." Still clinging to his arm, she twisted to face Miss Woodmont. "Alice is like a sister to me. I could not possibly feel right securing my own position when she is on the verge of being tossed out by her mother and father, as though she were no better than an old shoe."

"I—" Avery got no further than the single syllable. He rested one hand over Maeve's as it clasped on his arm and studied Miss Woodmont with a frown.

Miss Woodmont's eyes were downcast, and she worried her hands together in front of her. It was as if she wouldn't look either of them in the eye, now that Maeve had announced their decision. Avery narrowed his eyes as he continued to observe the woman. Maeve had repeatedly said that the two of them were like sisters, but it seemed to him as though it was not a sisterhood of equals. What sort of a friend would allow her dearest friend to break off an engagement to an earl?

Not to mention an engagement to a man who was swiftly coming to love her with passion and devotion.

He glanced to Maeve once more, his heart swelling. Never mind what sort of a character Miss Woodmont had, the fact that Maeve would go to such extreme measures to show her love and loyalty only endeared her to Avery more. She had a far better heart than he did, that much was certain. She was dazzlingly wonderful, as far as he was concerned.

“My dear, are you absolutely certain this is the decision you wish to make?” he asked, peeking at Miss Woodmont as he did.

Miss Woodmont glanced up at him. Her face went red under his scrutiny, but she kept her mouth shut.

“I—” Maeve began hesitantly. She chewed her lip—which Avery found to be far more arousing than any gesture had a right to be in that moment—and glanced between him and Miss Woodmont. At last, she took in a breath, squared her shoulders, and let go of his arm and stepped over to Miss Woodmont’s side. “Yes,” she said without looking at him. “I cannot abandon Alice when she needs me so.”

While Maeve’s gaze was still firmly focused on the floor, Avery glared at Alice. If the woman had no compunctions at all at ruining her friend’s happiness, then Avery had half a mind to steal Maeve away and force her to the altar—or tell her parents that he’d already had his way with her so they would force her—simply to pry her away from the influence of such a selfish and destructive woman.

But at what Avery considered the last second before his opinion of the woman was set, she burst out with, “You cannot do it, Maeve. You cannot forsake Lord Carnlough and your happiness just for me. You have to marry him.”

Maeve snapped her eyes up, gaping. For a beautiful moment, she seemed happy to be set free from her bonds of friendship.

A moment later, her face crumpled in misery.

“I cannot forsake *you*,” she told Miss Woodmont. “Not after everything you’ve been through. Not when your parents are so determined to not only ruin you, but to put your life in actual danger.”

That statement shifted Avery’s thinking and had him frowning for an entirely different reason. “What is this about Miss Woodmont’s parents tossing her out?”

Maeve and Miss Woodmont both turned wary glances to him. Miss Woodmont dropped her head slightly and said, “My parents have issued an ultimatum. They want me out of the house one way or another. I failed to catch your interest, my lord,” she added his title as a guilty show of respect, Avery was certain, “and they have made it known that they would give me in marriage to a Mr. Kilpatrick.”

“He’s horrible, Avery.” Maeve surged back to his side. “Not only is he old and grey, he’s a drunkard. And I distrust the stories of what happened to his first wife.”

Avery sucked in a breath, his disapproval and anger switching from Miss Woodmont to her parents.

“I will never go through with a marriage like that,” Alice said. “No matter what the consequences. I would take Ryan and run.”

“And where would you go?” Avery asked, dreading the answer.

Maeve and Miss Woodmont exchanged looks.

“We haven’t decided where yet,” Maeve said. “I am determined to rescue Alice from this horrible fate and to start a new life with her. We can pretend we are widows and start a business of some sort, perhaps a boarding house or a wool shop.”

The corner of Avery’s mouth twitched with a combination of amusement and irritation. Maeve certainly did not have the temperament to run a boarding house, or perhaps any other business. She was sweet to attempt a joke about a wool shop at that moment, but it was not the time for jokes. But again, Avery was deeply touched by her devotion to her friend.

“Where will you find the capital to begin such an endeavor?” he asked, knowing it was unlikely two young women of the middle class had that sort of money to their names.

“I have a bit of pin money saved up,” Maeve said.

“I do as well, although most if it has already gone to pay Mrs. Horner to care for Ryan. That is the other problem,” she said, looking guilty. “Mrs. Horner might not be able to continue to care for Ryan as she has. I will either have to find a new situation for him or come up with a way to care for him myself.”

It was exactly as Avery expected. He stared at Miss Woodmont for a moment, then glanced on to Maeve. It took him only a few, short seconds to decide that it was time he took the situation in hand.

“You will not run away and open a boarding house,” he told the two women. He focused on Miss Woodmont and said, “And you most definitely will not marry this Mr. Kilpatrick.”

“Then I will be out on the streets,” Miss Woodmont said, bristling with frustration. “Is that what you want for me? Are you so jealous of my friendship with Maeve that you would condemn me to homelessness and privation just to have her?”

Avery sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Miss Woodmont,” he said in what he thought was an incredibly patient voice for the situation, “I understand that you have been let down so often that it has turned you into a defensive wildcat protecting her kit, but do take a deep breath and understand that I am proposing to help you in your hour of need, not cast you to the wolves.”

Miss Woodmont looked as though she would fight on, but snapped her mouth shut and crossed her arms instead. "What are you proposing, my lord?"

That was more like it. Avery stood straighter, clasping his hands behind his back. "In a manner of speaking, I am proposing precisely what your parents proposed."

"I will not marry Mr. Kilpatrick," Miss Woodmont said, her jaw clenched.

Avery was tempted to sigh all over again, and to throw up his hands and march away. Instead, he closed his eyes for a moment to marshal his thoughts, then said, "I do not mean that you should marry Mr. Kilpatrick, but it is fairly obvious that marriage would be the perfect solution for you."

"You aren't suggesting that you marry Alice instead of me, are you?" Maeve asked, looking suddenly uncertain of everything.

Avery was sorely tempted to make a joke about bigamy, but instead he said, "Of course not, my love. I am proposing that Miss Woodmont marry someone, though."

"Who?" Maeve and Miss Woodmont asked simultaneously.

Avery shrugged. "I haven't the foggiest idea," he said. "Yet. But allow me a few days to speak with my cousins and a few of my acquaintances, and I am certain we will come up with a man worthy of your hand. In fact, I am confident enough in my matchmaking abilities to wager that I'll be able to have you engaged before Maeve and I are married."

"Our wedding is in less than a week," Maeve said doubtfully.

"And so Miss Woodmont will be engaged within a week," Avery said with a nod.

Again, Maeve and Miss Woodmont exchanged looks. It was a sign of the depth of their friendship that they appeared to be having an entire conversation without saying a word.

Finally, Miss Woodmont turned to him with a slightly baffled look and said, "I accept," with a shrug of her shoulders. "It is the only course of action for me, and I trust you to find a more agreeable man than my parents have found."

"I will do precisely that," Avery said, his smile returning. He stood a little taller and glanced between the women. "In fact, I already have arrangements to have lunch with my cousin, my brother-in-law, and Rory Feeney at the pub in just a few minutes—they are eager to hear how this ploy to reconcile the two of you has gone, you see—and I will consult with them to find you a groom."

Avery expected the two women to be overjoyed and to shower him with praise. Instead, both of their expressions fell flat, and they stared at him incredulously.

“You plotted this trap with Mr. Feeney, Lord Dervock, and Lord Rothbury?” Maeve asked, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes at him.

Part of Avery had no idea why Maeve would be upset about that. He often consulted his friends on matters of importance. The rest of him felt it was time to beat a speedy retreat.

“Would you look at the time,” he said without pulling his pocket watch from his waistcoat pocket. “I am late to meet the gentlemen in question. I trust that all is well here and that the two of you have much more you would like to talk about. I will not come between the two of you. Good day, ladies.”

Before either of them could stop him or cause any more of a fuss, Avery turned and fled the room. He didn’t consider his flight to be a defeat of any kind, and there was certainly honor in it. Maeve and her Miss Woodmont were friends again, and as soon as he was able to find Miss Woodmont a husband, everything would be as it should be.

Rory, Caelian, and Rafe were waiting at The Hangman Pub, just as they’d arranged. They’d already commandeered a table near the window and had pints of beer in front of them, including a spare pint for him. After what he’d just been through, Avery needed it.

His kinsmen greeted him with cheerful sounds of welcome as Avery strode over to the table and took a seat.

“How did it all go?” Rory asked, saluting him with his pint, then taking a drink.

“Splendidly,” Avery grinned, glossing over the fact that both women were a little put out with him, now that they were back in each other’s good graces. “Maeve and Miss Woodmont have reconciled, and all is well.”

“Congratulations.” Rafe saluted him with his pint as well.

“Huzzah,” Caelian added. “How did you manage it?”

Avery’s face heated a bit, which he hid with his pint. “It was a bit tricky for a moment, if you must know. Maeve nearly scared the life out of me by suggesting that she would call off our engagement in order to stay true to her friend.”

The three other men gasped, or in Caelian’s case, nearly choked on his beer.

“Why would she do that?” Rory asked, baffled. “No offense to Miss Sperrin, but your offer is far beyond anything a woman of her station could have expected.”

“Never underestimate the power of female loyalty,” Avery said sagely, then took a gulp of beer.

“I should say not,” Rafe said with a smile. “Angeline is devoted to her friends from Twittingham Academy. Even more so after the house party they attended, where we met.”

"Female friendships are sacrosanct," Caelian agreed.

"Which is why Maeve's continued willingness to marry me depends on Miss Woodmont marrying," Avery went on, setting down his pint and facing the others as though they were at an important parliamentary meeting. "I have promised Miss Woodmont that I will find a man to marry her within the week, and that she will be engaged before my and Maeve's wedding."

The other three gaped at him.

"And how do you propose to do that?" Rafe asked.

Avery smile. "By enlisting the help of my friends." He slapped a hand on the table. "So who do we know who is ready to be engaged to a lovely woman by the end of the week?"

The other three simply stared at him as though he'd grown another head.

"Come on, men," Avery attempted to rally them. "Surely we all must know someone who is in need of a wife."

"I heard that Mr. Kilpatrick, the mill owner, was looking to remarry," Caelian said with a shrug.

"Most definitely not him," Avery said, his eyes growing round. "Mr. and Mrs. Woodmont have already suggested the man, and doing so has caused Miss Woodmont to threaten to run away. And take my bride with her, I might add." He needed another gulp of beer to deal with that.

At least his kinsmen were sympathetic. They hummed and nursed their beers and sat back in their seats, mulling over the problem as though it were a riddle.

"I am certain I have plenty of employees who would be willing to marry a woman of my suggestion," Rory said, though he didn't look convinced by the idea.

Caelian shook his head. "Miss Woodmont would never be happy marrying a working-class man," he said. "No offense to your employees."

"I agree," Avery said. "Despite my upcoming marriage to Maeve, I believe it's best not to cross class lines." Particularly since Miss Woodmont had a vital secret that would make it that much more difficult to find a man willing to marry her. He had no intention of informing either his kinsmen or whatever prospective groom they came up with about that, though. That was for Miss Woodmont to divulge and her only.

"You know who might be a likely candidate?" Rory said, arms crossed, tapping his lips. The rest of them lifted their brows or looked at him, eager for the answer. "Mr. O'Donnell, the apothecary." Pure inspiration lit his eyes.

"That strange little man who lives on your street?" Avery asked,

wary of the plan.

“He might be a bit odd,” Rory said, “but he owns a prosperous business, he lives in a good neighborhood in Ballymena—Miss Woodmont would be welcome to call on Siobhan and to become a part of her circle, I’m sure—and even though he isn’t any sort of romantic ideal, he is roughly our age, and I am confident he would be kind to Miss Woodmont.”

Avery smiled. Perhaps his plan would be easier to carry out than he’d thought. “It sounds as though this Mr. O’Donnell is ideal for our purposes.” And with any luck, he wouldn’t mind his bride’s bastard child living with them.

Avery downed the rest of his beer—which was, perhaps, a bit too sudden of him—and slammed the glass on the table. “I’ll go speak with Mr. O’Donnell at once.” He stood, and even though the effects of the beer were still moderate, he swayed a little. “Gentlemen, I thank you for your wise council. You see? Men do not need the interference of women to solve our women’s problems for them. And I am certain that they will be grateful that we have come to their rescue.”

He wondered if it was fate or some sort of sign from the universe that he caught his hip on the edge of the table and stumbled as he started to walk away from his kinsmen. But no, they’d come up with a solid plan. Everything would work out, and by the end of the week, he’d be happily married and well on his way to living a peaceful and domestic life.

Something wasn't as it should be. With her wedding to a wonderful, generous, handsome, and ever so slightly naughty earl on the morrow, Maeve should have felt ecstatically happy and eager to get on with her new life. Instead, as she and Alice, along with several of Avery's female relatives, decorated Ballymena's church in preparation for the ceremony, she was racked with anxiety.

"Maeve, darling," Angeline, or rather, Lady Rothbury—Avery's truly lovely sister, who was round with child—said, approaching Maeve as she stood facing the chancel with a bouquet of hothouse roses in one hand and one of October wildflowers in the other, "is everything alright?"

"Hmm?" Maeve snapped herself out of her swirling thoughts—they weren't even full thoughts, more like emotions that couldn't quite grasp onto anything—and turned to face Lady Rothbury. "Oh," she gasped. "Yes, I am perfectly alright."

"You look a bit distressed," Lady Rothbury said, taking the bouquets from Maeve's hands. "Perhaps you should sit for a bit."

Maeve laughed guiltily. "It is I who should be counseling you to sit, Lady Rothbury," she said.

"It's Angeline, please," she said, handing the flowers off to one of the church helpers and escorting Maeve to the first pew. "Especially since we are to be sisters as of tomorrow."

Maeve smiled. She liked the idea of being sisters with Angeline. Though no one would ever replace Alice in her heart.

As if she could hear Maeve thinking about her, Alice dropped the ribbon she'd been cutting at a table that had been set up near the front of the sanctuary and crossed to stand beside Maeve's pew.

"Is everything alright?" she, too, asked.

"I'm fine," Maeve said with a sigh. "I'm more worried about you, if I'm honest."

Alice looked down at her hands with a guilty dip of her head. Alice had looked guilty all week long whenever the two of them had been together. And they'd been together nearly every day. Now that their fight was over, they'd spent every spare second they could together,

planning for Maeve's future as a countess and speculating on what Alice would do when the moment came that she would need to defy her parents and leave their house.

That moment hadn't come yet, but twice while Maeve had been at Alice's house for tea and preparations that week, Mrs. Woodmont had brought Mr. Kilpatrick and his offer of marriage up in conversation. Along with that, she had hinted without any subtlety at all that the consequence of Alice refusing the match would be banishment. Maeve found the fact that Mrs. Woodmont would bring the matter up while she was there to be insensitive and worrying.

"You've no need to worry about me," Alice insisted, glancing up and meeting Maeve's eyes at last. "I will face whatever comes next in my life with bravery and determination."

Maeve's heart clenched and she shot to her feet, embracing Alice. "I said it before and I'll say it once more. I will stand by you through thick and thin. Just say the word, and I will call this entire wedding off."

Alice laughed aloud. "The wedding is tomorrow. You cannot call it off. I won't let you."

"But I said I would run off and help you to start a new life," Maeve insisted. "And since Avery hasn't come through with his promise to find a husband for you, I feel as though I must."

"I wouldn't be so certain Avery has failed in his task," Angeline said, shifting in the pew to glance to the back of the room.

Sure enough, when Maeve and Alice turned, Avery had just entered the sanctuary. Not only that, he had another man with him. The two of them had a quiet word together while staring down the aisle at Maeve and Alice, and when Avery raised a hand to gesture to Alice, Maeve knew that he'd found a groom after all.

The only problem with that was his choice. Maeve wanted to groan out loud when she saw the avaricious smile that came to Mr. O'Donnell's eyes.

"Oh, no," she sighed, reaching for Alice's hand. "That cannot be who he's come up with after having nearly a week to search."

"It appears as though it is," Alice said with an equally wary sigh.

"I feel as though I've missed something," Angeline whispered, scooting to the end of the pew. "Do you know that gentleman?"

"It's Mr. O'Donnell, the apothecary," Maeve told her, unable to hide the groan in her tone.

"An apothecary isn't a bad profession," Angeline said, though Maeve had the feeling she was trying to make the best of what she could see wasn't an ideal situation. "He's not particularly handsome, but I suppose he's a good man. Otherwise, my brother would never have chosen him for you."

Maeve and Alice exchanged a look. Although, to be fair, there wasn't anything truly wrong with Mr. O'Donnell. Other than the fact that he was a dull bore, he constantly smelled of chemicals from his apothecary shop, and his hygiene needed a bit of improvement. As Lady Coyle was always insisting whenever she attempted to foist the man off on some unsuspecting young lady, those things could always be remedied.

"They're coming this way," Maeve whispered to Alice as the two men walked down the aisle. "Try to smile, and we'll figure out a way to gently let Avery know he's made a terrible choice. We'll come up with something else."

But Alice didn't glance back at Maeve as Avery and Mr. O'Donnell approached. Instead, she smiled with an alarming amount of geniality at Mr. O'Donnell.

"You look lovely today, my dear," Avery said, stepping closer to Maeve. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, flickering one eyebrow as he did. The dear man looked so proud of himself, as though he'd pulled off the impossible instead of bringing a disappointing man to the church as a solution to Alice's problems that would never do.

"Thank you, my lord," Maeve replied formally, as she was expected to do in mixed company. "Who have you brought to us today?" she asked, hoping Avery would interpret her tight smile as the disapproval it was meant to be.

"I would like to introduce you to Mr. Barry O'Donnell, one of Ballymena's leading apothecaries," Avery said, making the introduction in grand style.

"Ballymena's only apothecary," Mr. O'Donnell said in a rather nasal voice, bowing slightly to both Maeve and Alice. "All the others fancy themselves 'chemists' now, but I hold fast to the old ways. These newfangled chemical medicines and remedies will never last, you know. The old, herbal cures are always the best. And it is a shame that bleeding has gone out of style."

"Oh?" Maeve's voice wavered on the one syllable. She glanced desperately to Avery.

Avery's confident smile faltered. He cleared his throat. "Mr. O'Donnell, this is Miss Alice Woodmont."

"How do you do?" Alice said with an ingratiating smile that set Maeve's teeth on edge.

"Quite well, quite well," Mr. O'Donnell said. He tilted his head back and looked down his nose at Alice, humming as he did. "I'm pleased to say that you are as comely as Lord Carnlough promised you were," he went on. "When he said he had a matchmaking prospect for me, I was skeptical, of course. I have entrusted Lady Coyle with the

task of finding me a suitable bride throughout this last year, though her efforts have born little fruit. I am impressed by what I have before me now, though."

"How kind of you, Mr. O'Donnell," Alice said, smiling. "I trust that Lord Carnlough explained the situation and my reasons for wishing to find a husband as soon as possible?"

"That your parents think it's past time you married, they want you out of the house, and you are displeased with their choice for you?" Mr. O'Donnell said bluntly.

Alice's cheeks went pink, and she lowered her head. "That is correct, sir."

"Well," Mr. O'Donnell said with a self-satisfied sniff, "any opportunity I'm given to pip old Jeffrey Kilpatrick at the post is a good one. That bastard will be green with envy when he sees I've stolen a beautiful woman right out from under him, so to speak." He reached out and thumped Avery's shoulder before snorting with laughter.

Maeve was mortified. She was certain her face had lost all color, but as much as she stared at Avery, willing him to glance to her and see how distressed she was, no one seemed to mind her. Not even Alice.

"I am grateful that you would consider me as a bride," Alice said with a sort of sorrowful resignation that made Maeve want to scream. "And as you understand the need for haste, if you ask for my hand, I can assure you I will give it to you."

"Capital," O'Donnell said, clapping his hands together. "Consider it a done deal. I will look into having the banns read and preparing to accept you into my home as soon as possible." He raked Alice with a look that made Maeve's skin crawl and went on with, "The sooner the better, if you understand my meaning."

Maeve certainly did, and she was disgusted. After all the care and concern she'd shown for her friend, she could not believe it was all about to come to this.

As soon as Mr. O'Donnell said his goodbyes and Avery walked him out of the church, Maeve whipped to face Alice and said, "You cannot marry that boor."

Alice pressed her lips together and stared at the doorway Mr. O'Donnell and Avery had just departed through. "I don't see as I have much choice," she said.

"There is always a choice," Maeve insisted. "And that is certainly not it."

Alice let out an irritated breath and turned to her. "Is Mr. O'Donnell the man I would have chosen for myself?" she asked. "No, he is most certainly not. Is he as handsome and noble as your earl?"

Far from it. But he is a well-placed tradesman in Ballymena. We might not like him, but I have never heard a single story of him drinking too much and causing a scene, or of him behaving ignominiously with the ladies in town.”

“The fact that he is not married as of yet could be some indication that he is not worthy of a woman’s attention,” Maeve insisted.

Alice’s stare flattened. “Beggars cannot be choosers, my dear,” she said. “If I marry Mr. O’Donnell, I’ll have a comfortable life. I’ll have safety and security, even if I don’t have love or luxury. And if he’s willing to give Ryan a place in our house, I don’t see how I can say no.”

Maeve let out a breath of disappointment. As much as she hated to admit it, Alice had a point. Everything came down to Ryan. The fact that Avery had found a man willing to marry Alice even though she had a child should have been good enough for them all.

Her thoughts caught for a moment. He had mentioned Ryan to Mr. O’Donnell, hadn’t he?

But of course he would. It would have been foolish and deceptive of him to fail to mention Ryan, and Avery was neither. He wouldn’t have kept the boy a secret.

A moment later, Avery strode back into the sanctuary, looking deeply satisfied with himself. Maeve didn’t have a chance to inquire about what Mr. O’Donnell had been told before he said, “Ladies, I believe congratulations are in order for all of us,” clapping his hands together.

“Thank you so much for your efforts on my behalf, Lord Carnlough,” Alice said, then shot a look to Maeve. “Not everyone would have been willing to go to such lengths for me, but you and Maeve have proven yourselves to be the very best of friends.”

Maeve couldn’t help but feel as though she’d let her friend down somehow. “There will be someone else,” she insisted. “Someone far more suitable.”

Avery looked shocked by her comment. “And what is wrong with Mr. O’Donnell?” he asked. “He is well-established, young, he lives in a good neighborhood, and he is willing to marry Miss Woodmont on short notice.”

They were all the reasons Alice had just listed that she was willing to consider the man. Maeve remained unconvinced, though.

“There has to be someone else,” she sighed. “Perhaps someone in London.” She sucked in a breath as the thought struck her. “Yes, that’s it. You should come to London with us.”

“I—” Alice said, uncertainty pinching her face. “It seems as though matters are already settled, though.”

Maeve wasn’t satisfied with that answer. She wasn’t the least bit

satisfied with Alice's tacit acceptance of the terrible situation. "Avery," she pleaded, turning to grasp the sleeve of Avery's jacket.

"Miss Woodmont, perhaps you would assist me in locating a suitable lavatory," Angeline said, lifting her heavy body from the pew, where she'd sat to observe the entire scene. "One of the most vexing things about being in this condition is the constant need of a lavatory or chamber pot."

"Certainly, Lady Rothbury," Alice said. She stepped over to help Angeline, sending Maeve a wistful look as she did.

Everything about the situation, especially Alice's acceptance of a less than satisfactory fate, felt wrong. As soon as she and Avery were more or less alone, Maeve turned to face him fully, grasping the lapels of his jacket.

"This will never do," she said, hoping every bit of her worry for her friend shone in her eyes as she glanced up at Avery. "We can do better than Mr. O'Donnell. He will never be enough for Alice. I couldn't bear knowing that my dearest friend was unhappy in her marriage."

"But who is to say she would be?" Avery asked, seemingly baffled by Maeve's hesitation. "She will have a solid place in Ballymena society, which, you must admit," he leaned closer to lower his voice to whisper, "is something she never could have achieved on her own, all things considered."

Maeve pursed her lips and blew out a breath. "It doesn't feel right. I sense some sort of a disaster about to happen."

"But why should it?" Avery asked. "Miss Woodmont seems well-pleased with this arrangement. She is a clever and resourceful woman. I have full confidence that she will find happiness in her situation, given time."

Maeve hated the idea of contradicting Avery, but she was beginning to see that he knew nothing about the way a woman's heart worked. Then again, could any man ever truly know the inner workings of a woman's heart?

"I can see you are distressed," he said, seeming to prove that he had at least a tiny bit of understanding. "I promise you, my darling." He took her hands and clasped them to his chest, where she could hear the steady, confident beat of his heart. "If Miss Woodmont expresses even a little unhappiness with her new situation, we will not forsake her. If she needs a champion in the future, I know that champion will be you. And if something should happen and her hopes in this regard are dashed, I swear to you that we will stand by her and make certain she does not end up alone and friendless."

"Do you mean that?" Maeve glanced up at him, her heart brimming with love for Avery all over again.

“I absolutely do, my darling,” he said. “As long as you and I have breath in our lungs and strength in our hands, Miss Woodmont will have friends to help her through even the darkest of nights.”

“Oh, Avery,” Maeve sighed, blinking back tears. “That is all I needed to hear.”

“Good.” Avery peeked around, and when it was clear no one was watching them, he leaned in and stole a kiss.

It turned out to be a far fierier kiss than was appropriate for a church on the day before one’s wedding. Maeve gave herself over to it all the same, loving the way Avery’s mouth felt over hers, the way his lips pressed her so demandingly, and the way he boldly swiped his tongue against the seam of her mouth to coax her to open for him. She did so gladly, letting his tongue invade her. She even reached up to clasp the back of his neck and pulled him down so that she could take the aggressive role for a moment.

Avery laughed deep in his throat before he let her go. His eyes were alight with desire as the two of them stood there, panting and gazing amorously at each other.

“So help me, nothing is going to stand in the way of this wedding now,” Avery said. “And nothing is going to stop me from making you my wife, or from enjoying every last one of the things that are only supposed to be enjoyed by a married couple.”

Maeve burst into giggles at the naughty suggestion, but in her heart—and other parts of her anatomy—she knew she wanted that as much as he did. No matter what happened, tomorrow the two of them would be married, and woe to anyone who tried to stop that.

The more Avery thought about it, the more he thought he'd come up with a terrible idea.

The wedding was an hour away, and he sat in the vestry off of the chancel at the front of the church, knitting as fast as his shaking hands would move and dropping what felt like every other stitch. He'd had it in mind to knit a lovely muffler for Maeve as a wedding gift, and although he'd picked a complex design, the accessory was almost finished. However, he wasn't certain he would ever be able to finish it at the rate he was going.

"Dammit," he muttered as he dropped a stitch that unraveled across several rows. His tension had been so high for the last half dozen rows that he feared he would have to pull them out and redo the whole thing.

Just as he was beginning to think he really should pull out the terrible mistake he'd just made and figure out a way to redo it.

He'd put his needles on the vicar's changing table and started tugging at the loose end of his yarn when there was a soft knock at the door. Immediately, he whipped the unfinished scarf behind his back, his face heating, and called, "Who is it?"

"It's only me," Angeline's voice sounded in return. A moment later, his sweet sister pushed open the door and slipped inside—or rather, slipped as much as she could with her round belly. As soon as she clicked the door shut again and crossed the room to Avery, she said, "Oh dear. I see things are bad." She nodded to the knitting behind his back. "You only ever bring your scandalous hobby out of the house when you are very distressed indeed."

"I never—" Avery began to protest, then blew out a breath and took his knitting out from behind his back. It was ridiculous of him to think he could hide it anyhow, since the ball of yarn sat on the vicar's table and the free end connected to the muffler behind his back. He set the whole piece on the table, sighed heavily, then confessed to Angeline, "I think I've made a terrible mistake."

Angeline's brow flew up, and she rested her hands on her belly. "By marrying Miss Sperrin?"

Avery's eyes went wide. "No! Of course not. Marrying Maeve will be the wisest thing I've ever done. I'm too old to continue faffing about, getting into trouble and only keeping company with loose women. Maeve is the most wonderful creature to ever walk the earth, and I am proud to be marrying her."

Angeline looked both startled and puzzled over his speech and the vehemence with which he'd delivered it. "Then where is the mistake?"

Avery's shoulders dropped. "I never should have suggested that Miss Woodmont marry Mr. O'Donnell."

Angeline didn't answer with words, but the way she pressed her lips together and gave him one of her rare disdainful looks was all the answer Avery needed.

"Now that I have her, it would kill me to let Maeve go," he defended himself. "In a short time, she has become the light in my world and the blood in my veins. And that is why I sought out the first man I could find who would be willing to marry Miss Woodmont on short notice."

Angeline was still silent, but she arched one eyebrow while rubbing a hand slowly across her stomach.

"He isn't the worst match Miss Woodmont could find," Avery went on, arguing with himself now as much as attempting to justify his position to his sister. "He is everything I said he was before. He has a thriving business, he has done well for himself, and he is not yet old and decrepit. Many young ladies would consider him to be a catch."

"Many would," Angeline said, hesitation heavy in her voice.

"But not Miss Woodmont." Avery puffed out a breath and pushed his fingers through his hair—which was an unwise move, considering it had already been styled for the wedding and contained a great deal more pomade than he was used to wearing. He peeled off to the vicar's table, wiping his hand on a handkerchief that had been discarded there, then using the vicar's comb to straighten his hair. "I'm not certain why she even accepted the man's offer," he went on, looking at Angeline through the mirror.

"Because she loves her friend, Avery," Angeline said as though it were obvious. "Miss Woodmont knows that Miss Sperrin wanted to call off the wedding so that she could remain loyal to her, but because she is just as loyal, she wouldn't let that happen. Miss Woodmont has been willing to sacrifice herself for her friend's happiness."

Avery finished with his hair and turned to Angeline, his shoulders drooping yet again. "I am beginning to see that ladies are by far the nobler sex," he said. "This whole time, I have been thinking only of the happiness of a few, but I can see now that you precious creatures are so much more capable of thinking of the happiness and welfare of many."

He crossed the room to grasp Angeline's arms and to kiss her forehead.

"I do think you've created a muddle," Angeline said.

She opened her mouth to continue, but the vestry door opened at that moment and the vicar stepped in.

"Oh!" the man exclaimed with a start. "I beg your pardon, my lord. Only, it's nearly time. The guests are pouring in, and I need to don my vestments."

"We'll be out of your hair in just a moment," Avery said, maneuvering himself and Angeline to one side of the room as the vicar crossed to the wardrobe where, presumably, his vestments were kept. Avery ignored him, appealing to Angeline. "What can I do to remedy this?" he asked in a near whisper.

"I am unconvinced that you can remedy it," Angeline replied in an equally soft whisper. "Miss Woodmont has made her choice."

"But I hate the notion that I have caused someone to enter into a situation that has the potential to ruin their life," Avery said.

Angeline laughed, though Avery wasn't certain he deserved that when he was trying so hard to be noble and to right a wrong. "Men are such fussy creatures," she said, beaming up at him with the sort of love only a sister could have. "You have had your heads turned with the idea that it is your responsibility to guide and steer the world. But the truth is that we all make our own decisions, and when we come to our eternal rest, it is only our own choices and not the choices of others that we will be held accountable for. And frankly," she added as Avery opened his mouth to protest, "I believe that is a grand thing. The Almighty will not hold Miss Woodmont's unfortunate circumstances against her, only the choices she made in trying to mitigate those circumstances."

Avery closed his mouth and blinked at her. He couldn't help but smile. "Did that silly Miss Twittingham teach you that in her finishing school, or are you just naturally a fount of wisdom and goodness?"

Angeline laughed. "Papa taught me that," she said, growing somber. "In those final years we spent together before he went on to his heavenly reward."

Avery's chest squeezed at those words. He had loved his father dearly, and losing him had been a difficult blow. He had wondered every day since then if he was living up to the man's legacy and if his father would have approved of his choices in life.

He couldn't do it. He decided that much then and there. He couldn't let Miss Woodmont marry a boor like O'Donnell just so that he could have Maeve. He wouldn't have Maeve's life tainted by a sadness that could have been prevented. There had to be another choice before them.

“I think I need to—”

That was as far as he got before the vestry door flew open, banging against the wall, and a stunningly beautiful but thoroughly distraught Maeve dashed into the room. For a moment, Avery’s breath left his lungs at how lovely Maeve was in her white wedding dress, a crown of flowers in her hair, her cheeks pink and her eyes flashing. But as soon as he realized her color was because she was deeply alarmed, his heart stopped.

“Avery, you must come at once,” Maeve panted, crossing the room to grab his hand and drag him toward the door. “Mr. O’Donnell has found out about Ryan.”

Dread clenched Avery’s gut as he picked up his pace, bursting from the vestry onto the chancel, then down the aisle at the side and into the rows of pews. Maeve was right, but not only had O’Donnell clearly found out about Ryan, he seemed determined to let everyone else in Ballymena know as well.

“...a woman as devious as you,” he was in the middle of railing at Miss Woodmont as the two of them stood at the back of the sanctuary...along with more than two dozen of Ballymena’s finest citizens. “You, madame, are a liar and a witch. I wouldn’t have suspected a thing if a well-meaning maid hadn’t whispered the truth in my ear just this morning. How you could even think that a man of my respectability and standards would stoop so low as to marry a common whore with a bastard child clinging to her well-fondled breasts is beyond me.”

Deep gasps and even a few cries of shock sounded from the congregants watching O’Donnell berate Miss Woodmont. Fury shot through Avery, not only at O’Donnell, but for the fact that those watching his horrible set-down looked as though they were enjoying the scene as rogues might enjoy a cock-fight.

“What is the meaning of this?” Avery roared, charging up the aisle and causing everyone who stood in the way to leap aside and take cover in one of the pews. “How dare you speak to Miss Woodmont in such an underhanded manner?”

The people in the aisle weren’t the only ones who backed out of the way. Everyone else—including a few young men who had stood on the back pews to get a better view—scuttled away as though they were rats in a cellar and Avery carried a torch. O’Donnell didn’t seem to be deterred, though.

“My lord,” he said, stiffening his back and glaring at Avery, “I have a great deal of respect for the upper classes, but you are a devil indeed to have attempted to foist these used goods off on me.”

As Avery came to a stop only a few feet from O’Donnell, Maeve rushed on, throwing her arms around Miss Woodmont as though she

intended to protect her from a blast. Miss Woodmont was pale and her eyes were wide and red-rimmed. However long O'Donnell's tirade had gone on before he'd interrupted it, it had deeply affected the poor woman. She looked to be on the verge of either fainting or sobbing, which was not the Miss Woodmont Avery knew at all.

Which was why Avery pulled no punches when he turned to O'Donnell and raged, "How dare you hurl these sorts of accusations at a woman in public. I was grossly mistaken when I believed your character to be unimpeachable and your manners genteel."

"*You* were grossly mistaken, my lord?" O'Donnell puffed up indignantly. He threw an accusatory hand out to Miss Woodmont. "This woman has a child out of wedlock, a fact which you concealed from me, I might add."

"Avery," Maeve hissed, frowning at him. "You didn't tell Mr. O'Donnell about Ryan when you investigated his willingness to marry Alice?"

A rush of awkward prickles shot down Avery's spine. He supposed that was another mistake he'd made in his rush to ensure Maeve would go through with their wedding. He'd assumed Miss Woodmont and O'Donnell would work out that tiny detail on their own. But beyond that, whether she was aware of it or not, Maeve had just inadvertently confirmed everything O'Donnell had hurled at Miss Woodmont to the crowd of spectators. There might have been a way they could deny O'Donnell's accusations, but not now.

Sure enough, Lady Coyle, of all people, stepped forward from the onlookers, her face pinched as though she scented something foul, and asked, "Is it true?"

All eyes were on Miss Woodmont's lowered head at first. The confused—and too eager—onlookers murmured and whispered to each other, looking to Maeve for further confirmation as well. When neither woman said a word, their eager attention turned to Mr. and Mrs. Woodmont.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Woodmont wailed as the crowd parted to single them out as well. "I...that is...we didn't...." The woman pivoted to her husband, grabbed his sleeve, and shook him. "Do something Harold," she hissed.

Mr. Woodmont tilted his chin up and stared down his nose at his daughter. "We have been deceived by this wicked harlot long enough," he said, instantly causing Avery to want to pound the man into the ground. "She hid her evils from us until she couldn't any longer, and then she manipulated us into letting her keep the bastard close. But no more."

Mr. Woodmont narrowed his eyes at his daughter. "You have embarrassed us enough in front of our friends and the good people of

Ballymena. From this day forward, you are no longer any child of mine. You will not return to our house or take anything more from us, and your name will be struck from our family Bible. We are done with you and your bastard.”

The congregation gasped as Mr. Woodmont grabbed his wife’s hand and turned his back on Miss Woodmont. The two of them walked away, though they had to proceed down the aisle for a few pews, then cut across and exit through a side door, which gave them the appearance of sneaking off ignominiously instead of keeping their heads high.

The crowd didn’t seem to know what to do. Hushed silence filled the space left by the Woodmonts’ departure.

At least until O’Donnell cleared his throat and said, “I want nothing more to do with this trollop either, or anyone who would stand up for her.” He glanced to Avery. “I do not care how high and mighty you are, my lord, I will not marry a whore simply because you say so.”

“Alice is not a whore,” Maeve shouted with sudden vehemence, startling the eager onlookers. “She is a good and loyal woman who was done a great wrong by a wicked man. And why are none of you demanding to know the name of the man who lured her with false promises and disgraced her? Why do you simply assume that Alice is the one to blame when she was, in fact, the one who was treated abominably?”

“I can second that,” Rory spoke up from the edge of the pack of onlookers, all of whom turned to him. He took a small step forward and said, “My brother was the blackguard in question, and I can guarantee to you that he was absolutely the villain in Miss Woodmont’s unfortunate situation. His behavior toward her was so egregious that, you will notice, he was forced to flee the country because of it. And now he rots in prison. Any one of you who holds Miss Woodmont to blame for my brother’s actions is no better than the arse himself.”

Another, deep hush fell over the church as those words sank in. For one, glorious moment, Avery was convinced they might actually win people back to Miss Woodmont’s side.

Until Lady Coyle made a snorting sound and said, “Are you suggesting that we all cast aside everything we know about the sinful ways of sirens? Are you suggesting that we accept a woman who allowed herself to be debauched, and her bastard as well, simply because you have made some sort of a pretty speech and attempted to cast the blame elsewhere?” Too many of the people watching nodded as though they agreed with Lady Coyle. “Everyone knows that it is a woman’s stalwart duty to defend her virginity, to the death if

possible.”

Maeve’s jaw dropped. “Lady Coyle, are you saying that Alice should have died rather than fallen in love and allowed herself to be seduced.”

Lady Coyle blinked at Maeve as though she had gone mad. “Yes,” she said with a shrug, as though it were obvious. “Nothing is so precious or so fragile as a woman’s virtue. Miss Woodmont should accept the natural consequences of failing to do her duty to her sex.”

Avery couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Who else among you believes that tripe?” he asked. When no one answered, he went on. “Don’t be shy. I want to see a show of hands. If you believe that a woman is nothing without her virtue, by all means, make yourselves known.”

It was unsurprising, and strangely disappointing, that so many of the people whom he had counted as friends and friendly acquaintances raised their hands to support the ridiculous notion. Worse still, he knew it was a notion that society at large claimed to support as well, though what people did in their own houses was vastly different from the what they purported to believe in public. The hypocrisy of it all set Avery’s teeth on edge, especially because he knew it was a hallmark of the age.

“Fine,” he said, nodding to those who had raised their hands. “Get out. I don’t want any of you here. If you insult my bride’s friend by reviling her, then you are no longer invited to share in our happiness today.”

When no one moved at first, Avery’s temper flared.

“Get out!” he shouted, pointing to the door. “Or do you need help getting out?”

Avery didn’t expect it, but he was delighted when Rory stepped forward with a surprisingly threatening mien, as though he were a bouncer at a pub charged with throwing out the unruly patrons. Not only Rory, but Rafe and Caelian too. And his cousins’ husbands, Christian, Benedict, and Colin—who looked excessively eager to get into a fight.

That was enough to send half the congregation running for the doors. So much that there was a jam for a moment as frightened men and women pushed to get out first. Avery couldn’t help but laugh at that.

His laughter only lasted a moment before he turned his attention on Maeve and Miss Woodmont. The two of them stood together with their arms around each other. Avery was worried that Maeve would feel their wedding was ruined, but instead she looked as though she couldn’t have imagined a better wedding day.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes brimming with pride and victory.

“Thank you for standing up for Alice.”

“I will always stand up for you, Miss Woodmont,” Avery said, bowing respectfully to her. “You are precious to my bride, therefore you are precious to me.”

“You may have just done yourself a great deal of harm,” Alice said, her voice hollow. She was clearly still stunned by the whole turn of events.

“I am not in the least bit concerned,” Avery said. “In fact, I owe you an apology.”

“An apology?” Miss Woodmont blinked at him as though she were trying to pull herself out of a bad dream.

Avery sighed. “I never should have suggested you marry that oaf, O'Donnell. I have made things so much worse.”

“You were trying to make them better,” Maeve defended him.

“I was,” Avery nodded, smiling weakly at her. “I should have sought a different solution, though. Now I have caused you to be cast out by your family and by Ballymena.”

“You didn't mean for that to happen,” Miss Woodmont said, then turned to Maeve with a terrified look. “I have no idea where I'll go now.”

In an instant, Avery knew exactly what needed to be done. They'd touched on the idea before, but now it seemed like the ideal solution.

“You will come to London with us,” he said. “Maeve and I will provide you and Ryan with the capital you need to start a new life there. I have friends in many circles of London society, and any introductions you need will be provided. I insist.”

Miss Woodmont sucked in a breath and clutched Maeve tighter. The two of them exchanged another of their silent communications, excitement lighting their eyes for the first time in the intense scene.

“What do you say, Miss Woodmont?” Avery asked. “Will you come to London with me and my bride?”

Maeve hadn't thought it was possible to be more in love

with Avery, but when he stood up for Alice in front of everyone, going so far as to throw them out of the church, her heart blossomed with adoration for him. And to suggest that Alice could accompany them to London and start a new life there? Maeve wasn't certain her heart could take much more. Everything that could have turned into a disaster was blooming into the perfect situation for everyone.

"You would really have me?" Alice asked, blinking rapidly and glancing between Maeve and Avery. "And Ryan?" she added in a quieter voice, peeking around. "You wouldn't mind both of us?"

"Not at all," Maeve answered quickly and joyfully. "Of course Ryan could come with you."

Only after giving her enthusiastic approval did Maeve think to check with Avery. But as she'd hoped, Avery was all smiles.

"I think that is only fitting," Avery said with a nod. "We'll find the right situation for both of you, I swear."

Alice's worry and the tremulous hope that had filled her expression burst into a wide smile, and she blinked back tears. "Thank you," she said, nearly sobbing with joy. "You cannot know what this means to me. This is...this is the difference between life and death for me."

"So you'll come with us?" Maeve asked, just to be sure. "You'll come away on Tuesday, when we pack all of our things and leave for the season?"

Alice nodded quickly and passionately before she could form the words to say, "Yes. Yes, I will. Gratefully. Happily."

To Maeve's surprise, the people who had stayed behind after Avery threw the detractors out broke into applause. Someone even shouted, "Bravo," above the sudden din. It was enough to have Maeve blushing with joy on Alice's behalf.

"And now," Avery said, raising his voice a bit to settle the crowd, "I believe we have a wedding to celebrate. And afterwards, a reception at my family's estate."

"We most certainly do," Mr. Feeney—who was standing closest to Avery—said, thumping him on the back, then steering him toward the

front of the church to take his place for the ceremony.

Maeve was overjoyed that things could continue as they should have, with Avery standing up at the front of the church, Lord Rothbury acting as his groomsman and standing with him. The congregation—who must have all felt as though they'd seen a show worthy of tickets at Covent Garden—resumed their seats and settled into a state that was at least slightly reverent.

That left Maeve to take up her position at the back of the church, Alice by her side. What she hadn't counted on, however, was that even though she knew they likely shared the beliefs of everyone who had just been tossed out of the church, her parents were still there. They stood at the back of the church, looking stunned.

"This is all highly irregular," her father fussed and grumbled, his moustache twitching in agitation as everyone else seemed to move on smoothly. "I am no longer certain I wish to give you away to a man who would flout social convention so boldly."

"Maeve, darling," her mother added, her face pinched, "are you certain you will be entirely happy with a gentleman who holds such strange and revolutionary views of morality?" She wrung her hands in front of her and glanced around, as though waiting for someone to toss her out as well.

"Yes, Mama," Maeve said with absolute confidence, emboldened by Avery's strength and righteousness. "I am absolutely certain that I will be perfectly happy with Avery. He is brave and understanding. He is unusual and unconventional, yes, but in the very best of ways."

"He seems rather dangerous to me," her father said, sending Avery a glare as he waited at the front of the church.

Avery wore a look of concern that made Maeve wonder if he would march to the back of the church to see what was going on.

"He is everything I have always wanted in a man," Maeve contradicted her father. "He understands that there are more things in life than rules and his own concerns. He is a champion not only for me, but for my friend." She looped her arm through Alice's and held her close. "Nothing is more important than a man who would risk his own comfort to provide for the happiness of others."

"Still," her father argued, crossing his arms and looking as though he would grow roots to keep him to his spot, "I am not sure I wish to give you away to him, even if he is an earl."

"Then you will not have to," Maeve said, breaking into a smile. "My friend will give me away." She turned to Alice with a giddy lift in her heart.

"I most certainly will," Alice said, standing tall and hugging Maeve's arm. "Because I know I am giving you away to the very best of men."

Without waiting to hear what Maeve's parents thought of that, the two of them turned and started down the aisle.

Avery smiled in approval at their boldness—though a few of the people watching from the pews looked downright stunned at the turn of events—and when they reached the front of the church, he nodded respectfully to Alice.

“Thank you for taking care of my bride, and for giving her over to me,” he said.

“I wouldn't have had it any other way,” Alice said, winking, then stepping aside.

Maeve's heart flipped in her chest as Avery turned to smile at her and to walk the last few steps onto the chancel, where the stunned vicar was waiting to perform the ceremony. Given some of the weddings that had happened over the summer, it wasn't the strangest ceremony the poor man had officiated.

Once the formal ceremony itself began, though, there was nothing at all unusual about it. All of the usual words were spoken, the familiar prayers were offered up to a god that Maeve was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt was benevolent and who loved all of his creations, no matter how naughty they were, and after the standard vows were exchanged, the vicar pronounced her and Avery to be husband and wife.

Maeve had never been so happy as that moment when she kissed Avery for the first time as Lady Carnlough, as his wife and his own. The moment was made even better when the members of the congregation who had stayed applauded for them, even though that, too, was highly unusual. Everything about the ceremony was strange and exciting, but the results were the most thrilling thing of all.

“Welcome to our scandalous family,” Lady Marie Kilrea said with a tight hug as she and the rest of the family took their turns greeting the bride and groom at the reception later that morning. “I am very pleased to see that you have lived up to the horrible reputations we have all given ourselves right from the beginning.”

Her sister Colleen, Lady Stamford, was standing with them and laughed out loud. “I don't believe any of us set out to give the family such a wicked reputation in County Antrim, but we all managed it somehow.”

“I'm just sorry that there wasn't enough time for Chloe and Deane—that is, the Duchess and Duke of Blackburn,” Marie said, affecting a snooty tone, “to come over for the wedding.”

“We received a telegram that they will pay a call on us in London,” Avery announced, coming up behind Maeve, resting a hand on the small of her back, and joining the ladies' conversation. “And from what I know of my cousin Chloe, she will simply adore Miss

Woodmont and will aid us in our mission to find her and her son just the right place in society.”

Marie and Colleen quieted just a bit as they shifted to watch Alice across the room, where she was engaged in conversation with an old school friend of Avery's, Mr. Samuel Rathborne-Paxton, who just happened to be in Ireland and had been able to attend the wedding on short notice.

“Do you think she'll be alright?” Marie asked, genuine concern knitting her brow. “I cannot believe she managed to conceal her son for over two years.”

“It was quite a difficult feat to accomplish,” Maeve said with a sigh.

“Is the boy safe?” Colleen asked, blinking as though the idea had just come to her. “Mr. and Mrs. Woodmont wouldn't set the baby out on the front stoop and abandon him to the elements, would they?”

“The boy, Ryan, is being fostered by a Mrs. Horner,” Avery informed them. “I have met the woman, and I am confident that she will keep him safe until Miss Woodmont is able to pack his things and bring him away to London with us.”

“So all really has ended well for Miss Woodmont,” Marie said. “Or, at least, as well as could be expected.”

“I sincerely hope so,” Maeve said, smiling when Alice glanced in their direction and lifted her hand in a wave.

Mr. Rathborne-Paxton had just turned away from their conversation, and Alice made an impressed face, gestured to the man, and mouthed the words, “Yes, please.”

Marie burst into laughter and clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Yes,” Maeve said. “I have a feeling my dear friend will land on her feet.”

The rest of the reception passed with more joy and pleasantries, but Maeve was surprised by how happy she was once their guests left and she and Avery were able to retire to their bedchamber. The fact that it was their bedchamber made her happy beyond her wildest expectations.

“My mother took me aside to give me a certain talk about what is expected of me as a new bride,” she told Avery, sending him a sly grin over her shoulder as he undid the buttons of her bodice. “It was surprisingly edifying.”

Avery jerked away slightly, breaking into a snorting laugh. “I was under the impression both of your parents had ascertained what happened between us the night of the storm.”

“I'm certain they had,” Maeve said with a laugh, “but Mama pretended as though I was as virginal as ever as she instructed me that it was my duty to lie peacefully on my back with my legs spread to

the sides, and to hum hymns to myself if I became too distraught.”

Avery laughed as well, but the sound had a decidedly delicious and predatory rumble to it as he loosened her bodice and slipped it from her shoulders. Because of the way her wedding gown was designed, a few more tugs on the drawstrings of her petticoat and the entire gown slithered down her body to the floor.

She still had quite a few underthings to remove before she was undressed, but that didn't stop Avery from scooting closer, kissing her shoulder and neck, staring down the front of her corset and chemise, and singing, “How wonderous are the works of God” as he ogled her breasts.

Maeve giggled at his irreverence, but those giggles quickly turned to gasps and sighs as he unhooked her corset, let it drop, and peeled her out of her chemise. He hummed appreciatively as he stroked his hands up her sides to cup her breasts, kneading them slightly and rubbing her nipples into hard points—all while still standing behind her and resting his chin against her shoulder. It was ever so slightly ridiculous, but the way his touch felt as he deliberately aroused her had Maeve itching to get on with things.

“You have gorgeous breasts, my dear,” he told her in a growl, settling them in his hands in such a way that sizzles of pleasure shot through her, making her sex throb. “I think I could spend all night making love to them alone.”

“Is that so?” Maeve managed in a breathless voice.

“Oh, yes,” Avery answered.

As if to prove his point, he lifted her out of the pile of her wedding dress and carried her to the bed, lying her across the already turned-down sheets. Even though she still had her stockings and drawers on—and even though Avery was still dressed in his shirt and trousers—she followed her mother's sage advice and spread her legs so that he could settle between them.

Instead of callously thrusting into her, as her mother must have thought a groom would do on his wedding night, Avery bent over her, bringing his mouth to first one breast, then the other, trading off kissing the two of them in a way that both inflamed her and left her entirely unsatisfied.

“I cannot decide which one I like best,” he said, bending down to lick one of her nipples, then repeating the gesture with the other. “They both taste delicious,” he said, then dipped down again. He took his time drawing each nipple into his mouth and sucking with just enough force to have her writing under him, then moving on to the other side. “They both feel perfectly divine.”

“Is one expected to have a favorite breast?” she asked breathlessly, reaching to undo the buttons of Avery's shirt, which could only

happen clumsily as he continued to move.

"Of course," he said with mock seriousness, lifting above her so he could look down. "One must always have a favorite."

Maeve laughed, racing through his buttons as quickly as she could while he was in the right position, pulling the hem of his shirt out of his trousers, then yanking it off over his head. He moved his arms and helped her discard it entirely, and when his chest was bare, she raked her hands over his warm flesh and chest hair, catching his nipples in her fingers. She played with them the way he'd played with her, frowning in mock concentration at one side, then the other.

"I think I prefer this one," she said with almost academic dryness, toying with his right nipple.

"Are you quite certain?" he asked gravely.

She answered by meeting his eyes with an impish smile, then pinching his right nipple hard.

Avery let out a shout that turned into a laugh. "You minx!"

He shifted to balance on one arm and raised a hand as if he would pinch one of her nipples as well, but Maeve twisted and laughed, wriggled under him and pretended to try to get away, but all to no avail.

Somehow in their wrestling match, Avery had managed to divest himself of his trousers and Maeve of her drawers, although he left her silk stockings on. Maeve pretended to struggle as best she could, but within a few, absolutely glorious minutes, Avery had managed to pin her hands above her head and had somehow spread her hips even wider. She realized with panting breaths of expectation that he had somehow maneuvered her into an utterly helpless, completely delicious position under him.

"Oh, dear," she panted, her body on fire with arousal and her heart overflowing within her. "You seem to have me at a disadvantage, my lord. Whatever are you planning to do to me?"

The only warning she had was Avery's devilish grin before he brought himself to her entrance and thrust inside of her. He wasn't gentle or sweet about the way he took her, but considering how filled and stretched and loved she felt with his powerful gesture of possession, she wouldn't have wanted him to be. God help her, but she loved the definitive way he claimed her, thrusting with single-minded passion while she cried out in time to his thrusts.

"I love you, Maeve," he grunted as he thrust, shifting from pinning her hands above her head to gripping her thighs and opening her wider to him. Maeve kept her hands right where they were, giving herself to him gladly. "I love you so much."

"And I love you," she gasped in return, though she didn't know where she found the words.

He paused to adjust their position, lifting her hips so that he could pound into her from a different angle. Everything about the way he made love was brutal and aggressive, and Maeve adored it. The way he used her body for his own pleasure sent her towering to heights of pleasure that she'd never known before. She wasn't even certain when her orgasm started, but it roared through her with a declaration of ecstatic victory that filled every fiber of her being.

"Avery! Yes!" she cried out, arching into the pleasure and rolling her eyes back with abandon.

Avery let out a strangled cry that didn't quite form into words and thrust hard into her a few more times before he, too, came apart with a roar that could have shaken the windows from their casements. Maeve loved the way his body went rock hard as his life spilled into her, then the way it softened into a hot, sated mass as he sank over her with a groan. She even loved the way his weight nearly crushed her. It made her feel as though the two of them were one on every level.

"That was magnificent," she panted a few moments later, as Avery rolled them to the side—though he stayed lodged within her. "Simply brilliant."

Avery peeked at her with a somewhat guilty look. "It wasn't too... much?" he asked, then rushed to add, "I don't usually turn into a ravening beast, intent on claiming what is his, like that."

Maeve laughed deep in her throat, undulating her body against his. "I loved it," she hummed, leaning into kiss him. "I love it because it is you. I love you just as you are, rough edges and all."

"And I love you," he said with an exhausted smile, shifting the way he held her so that it was all tenderness and care. "You are the making of me, Maeve O'Shea. I am a better man a thousand times over for knowing you."

"And we shall both spend every day of the rest of our lives making each other better and better as we go," Maeve replied with a kiss. She knew it was true.

Epilogue

Alice shifted Ryan in her arms, hugging him close as they waited

their turn to board the ferry that would take them across the Irish Sea to England. Maeve and Lord Carnlough stood just in front of her, but they were so wrapped up in each other and surrounded by the glow of love that they barely saw her. Alice didn't mind at all, though. She had her own sort of love to guide her and keep her warm.

"Look at the boat, Ryan," she said, pointing up at the large ferry. "Isn't it a pretty boat?"

"Boat!" Ryan repeated, clapping his hands excitedly.

"Yes," Alice told him. "We're going on a boat, and we're going to start a whole new life in a whole new place."

The line they were waiting in moved forward. Alice picked up the old suitcase she'd used some of her meager pin money to buy off of Mrs. Horner and moved forward with it. Everything she owned that belonged to both her and Ryan was in that suitcase, although bystanders who looked at her would never dream that she was destitute. She wore one of Maeve's fine dresses, and Lord Carnlough had purchased a traveling coat and pretty hat for her just that morning. But they were the only nice things she had to her name at the moment.

True to their word, her parents hadn't let her back in their house after the wedding. They'd refused to give any of Alice's things to her either, saying that they were the ones who had purchased them, therefore they were the ones that owned them. It was a hard blow, but one that was softened, since Alice had a place to stay with Maeve and Lord Carnlough. They had sworn that they would provide her with clothing and shoes and everything else she might need as well.

The line moved forward again, and again she picked up the suitcase and took a few more steps with Ryan.

"Fishies?" Ryan asked, pointing at the water. For a moment, he struggled to get out of Alice's arms. "Fishies!" he insisted.

"Hold still, darling," Alice said, trying to manage both Ryan and the suitcase as the line inched on. "Once we're on the ferry we can look for fishies."

“Fishies!” Ryan insisted.

Alice laughed, though she was starting to lose her breath as she juggled her son and all of her earthly belongings.

She felt bad enough that Maeve had given her so much—both second-hand clothing and new clothes, shoes, hats, underthings, and toiletries, purchased yesterday for their trip today. Maeve was the best friend a woman could have. But she was also married now and so deeply in love that it was obvious to everyone.

As grateful as Alice was for Maeve’s and Lord Carnlough’s hospitality, she had already made up her mind that she would only rely on it for six months at the most. Six months, and she would strike out on her own with Ryan, no matter what that meant, no matter what her resources, no matter how it happened. She would let her friend take care of her while she got her bearings in London, but then she would provide for herself. Whatever it took.

“Mama,” Ryan complained, struggling even more to get out of her grasp. He’d spotted seagulls now and apparently wanted to go after them. “Mama!”

The line was moving even faster now, which made it next to impossible to manage everything she had in her arms. It was only a matter of time before she dropped the suitcase, because she certainly wasn’t going to drop Ryan and let him get away.

“Mama!”

Ryan kicked and struggled hard. The suitcase slipped out of Alice’s hand...but instead of crashing to the dock and breaking open, someone caught it.

“Whoopsie daisy,” a warm, slightly familiar male voice said.

Alice made certain Ryan was secure in her arms before twisting to see who had caught her suitcase. As soon as she met his eyes, she gasped.

“Mr. Rathborne-Paxton,” she said, giddy and breathless and thoroughly distracted as Ryan continued to squirm. “I didn’t realize you were traveling back to England today.”

“Miss Woodmont?” Mr. Rathborne-Paxton looked as startled to recognize her as she was to see him. He smiled, but not for her, for Ryan. “Is this the famous bastard child I’ve heard so much about?”

Alice’s jaw dropped as panic welled within her. He’d seemed like such a charming gentleman at the party—and he was the son of a marquess to boot—but with a comment like that....

Mr. Rathborne-Paxton’s expression dropped to one of horror a moment later. “I am so terribly sorry,” he said in a rush. “That was unforgivably rude of me. Can you ever forgive me?”

Alice eyed him warily, not sure if she could.

A moment later, the man standing in line behind both of them

cleared his throat loudly and said, "Move on, will you?"

Alice jumped and noticed that the line to board the ferry had gotten away from her. She clasped Ryan tightly against her and rushed to catch up. Mr. Rathborne-Paxton hurried along with her.

"Thank you for your help," she said, trying to grab her suitcase back from him, now that Ryan was distracted by the boat again. "And yes, this is the famous bastard child you've heard so much about." She glared at him as she spoke.

"Again, I am so sorry," Mr. Rathborne-Paxton said. "Unforgiveable of me, really. Let me carry your bag as penance, as you clearly have enough to manage with your handsome and I'm sure quite intelligent son."

Alice laughed in spite of herself. "He has never been on a boat before," she confessed as they moved to the gangplank and walked across into the ferry. "This is all quite new and exciting for him. For both of us."

"Yes, I was at the wedding," Mr. Rathborne-Paxton said with a wince. "I was quite proud of my friend, Lord Carnlough, for the offer he made to resituate you in London."

"It was generous of him," Alice said, mostly distracted as she searched to see where Maeve and Lord Carnlough had gone off to, and where she might find a seat with Ryan.

"As it happens, I am returning to London myself," Mr. Rathborne-Paxton went on. "And I do feel terrible for my comment just now. Perhaps you will allow me to assist you on the journey, since it is likely we are taking the same conveyances?"

Alice considered it. She knew the look of interest in Mr. Rathborne-Paxton's eyes. She'd seen that sort of interest before. The man already knew about Ryan, and if he was the son of a marquess, she knew full well it wasn't the consideration a man of his stature gave to a woman he could hope to know in public.

But he was handsome, and he seemed genuinely sorry for his comment. And Lord help her, she did need assistance while traveling with Ryan.

"Thank you, Mr. Rathborne-Paxton," she said.

"Samuel, please," he said with a smile. "Or, my close friends call me Sam. Only the very close ones, though."

Yes, the man most definitely had an interest in her. And if she were honest with herself, Alice wasn't entirely opposed to that interest. There were more ways to make a new life in London than in the ballrooms and drawing rooms of polite society.

"I accept your offer for help, Sam," she told him with her best, flirtatious smile. "And if all goes well, I may call on you for more help once we reach London."

“I would be honored to be at your service, my lady,” Sam said, touching the brim of his hat.

Alice smiled as she found a place for her and Ryan near the ferry’s rail, where he would be able to look out at the sea as they left their old home for a new one. A whole new life lay before her, and if men like Mr. Rathborne-Paxton were any indication, it could be a very interesting one indeed.

I HOPE you’ve enjoyed Maeve and Avery’s story! Victorians were really weird about the sexes, that’s one thing I’m pretty sure everyone knows (and it’s actually accurate too!). Overall, Victorian society was deeply concerned with keeping the realms of men and women separate...which was why the friendships that women formed with each other were so vitally important. A woman had to rely on her female friends for everything, and a friend break-up of the sort that Maeve and Alice almost experienced (and that I experienced myself right at the beginning of college) was such a big deal! Women were each other’s first, last, and only line of defense against the slings and arrows of the world. (And for those who were wondering, my friend Jess and I patched things up twenty years later, and we’re close again now. Yay!)

This was also an aspect of women that men were so utterly clueless about. And yes, I had a ton of fun writing Avery’s, Rory’s, Rafe’s, and Caelian’s cluelessness when it came to female friendships. But by the end of the 19th century, things were starting to change, although it would take a couple of huge wars and a few periods of backsliding before it was considered normal for men and women to just be friends and to hang out together.

Another interesting, historical point I had fun playing with in this book was the increasingly common circumstance of middle-class women “marrying up” into the aristocracy at the end of the Victorian era. There were several reasons for this. The most important is the fact that, as the Industrial Revolution and the changes it brought shifted wealth from the aristocracy to enterprising men of the middle class, aristocrats like Avery needed infusions of cash to keep their estates running. We all know about the American Dollar Princesses that some of them married (and that, I’ll confess, I love writing about, because historically, so many of them were such characters), but many also married the daughters of these industrial titans, who brought huge dowries with them. On the other side of that coin, marrying into the aristocracy was the biggest social prize a middle-class family could gain at the time, and it carried extraordinary bragging rights with it. I

didn't go into the details of the Sperrin family, but let's just say they hit the jackpot with Maeve and Avery's marriage.

Aren't you glad we don't marry for social advantage and class value anymore (for the most part)?

BUT WHAT ABOUT POOR ALICE? What sort of a life can she expect in London as a ruined woman with a young son? And could the mysterious Mr. Samuel Rathborne-Paxton have something to do with her new life? Find out soon in *That's Why the Lady is a Tramp*, the first book in an all-new series, *The Unsuitable Brides*!

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About the Author

I hope you have enjoyed *Naughty Earls Need Love Too*. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F>.

Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Justine and Peter. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



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